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THE NEW YORKER

FEB. 17 & 24, 2020

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THE NEW YORKER
95TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE
FEBRUARY 17 & 24, 2020

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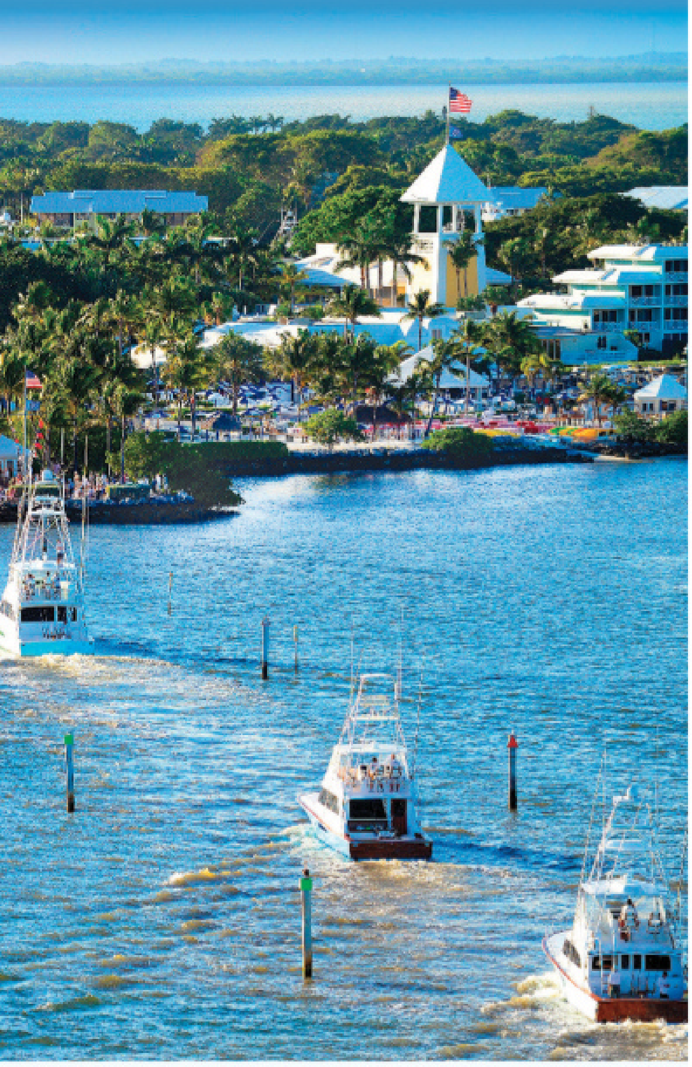

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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW
Masha Gessen talks with the academic Judith Butler about the possibilities of nonviolence.

PHOTO BOOTH
Eren Orbey on how the queer, disabled artist Joey Solomon is reimagining the diagnostic gaze.

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LEFT: CAYCE CLIFFORD FOR THE NEW YORKER; RIGHT: JOEY SOLOMON

THE MAIL

DEMOCRACY, THEN AND NOW

Jill Lepore's report on the grassroots democracy debates that took place in the nineteen-thirties is a useful antidote to today's widespread pessimism ("In Every Dark Hour," February 3rd). But the question we must ask now is not what people might do to preserve democracy's future but what democracy might do to preserve theirs. The surge of citizen engagement inspired by the bicentennial of the American Revolution, in the nineteen-seventies, offers a model. Communities from Maine to California gathered to discuss how they wanted their states or localities to look in the year 2000. They considered issues such as environmental sustainability, land use, race, and poverty. These conversations could have been the first steps toward a political culture of truly democratic exchange. But after Ronald Reagan was elected, in 1980, there seemed little point to crafting a common future in a world driven by radical individualism. Nevertheless, any strategy for restoring faith in democracy after the Trump Presidency should involve ordinary citizens working together to envision and create a better tomorrow.

Jeff Faux
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Lepore offers an astute accounting of the last time the future of American democracy was in doubt. As always, she shines light into dark corners of U.S. history. But the piece disappoints insofar as Lepore, like many intellectuals, overrates the power of media to "bring people together." She is correct, of course, that grownup discussion has deteriorated since the time when radio gave Americans "a sense of their shared suffering, and shared ideals." Indeed, disinformation is now a major impediment to democratic life. But let's not kid ourselves that tinkering with the programming on NPR or PBS is going to drag us back from the brink. There are many equally grave institutional obstacles to democracy today, including the anti-democratic skew of the Senate and the Electoral College; the rollback of voting rights by Republican politicians and courts; the plutocratic bent of the Supreme Court, which enables corporate money to overwhelm public interests; and Silicon Valley's treatment of political speech as a commodity. We need a full-on, democratic with a small "d" reconstruction.

Todd Gitlin
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I was happy that Lepore wrote about the schoolteachers and other citizens who took an active role in pro-democracy activities in the nineteen-thirties, when many people in the U.S. were turning to authoritarian systems for comfort and security. It is worth noting that a large percentage of these teachers were women, who knew firsthand what it meant to live without agency in a developing democracy. They had learned through their struggle for suffrage how to organize, mobilize, and, most important, educate. It is no surprise that these teacher-led forums had a pedagogical function; that is, they subtly taught a diverse citizenship that democracies survive only when people are compelled to listen, learn, challenge, argue, and find common ground. And, as Lepore points out, they ultimately helped move the U.S. against authoritarianism. It is unclear whether we can again educate an anxious citizenship about the benefits of democracy, but we must try.

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Ellen Reid, whose arresting opera "p r i s m" won a Pulitzer in 2019, joins the **New York Philharmonic** for the première of "When the World as You've Known It Doesn't Exist," Feb. 20-22, at David Geffen Hall. Reid wrote the piece for **"Project 19,"** a multiyear series honoring the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, for which the Philharmonic has commissioned works from nineteen distinguished women composers. The initiative also presents Tania León's "Stride," nestled among warhorses by Brahms and Strauss, Feb. 13-18.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOELLE GRACE TAYLOR

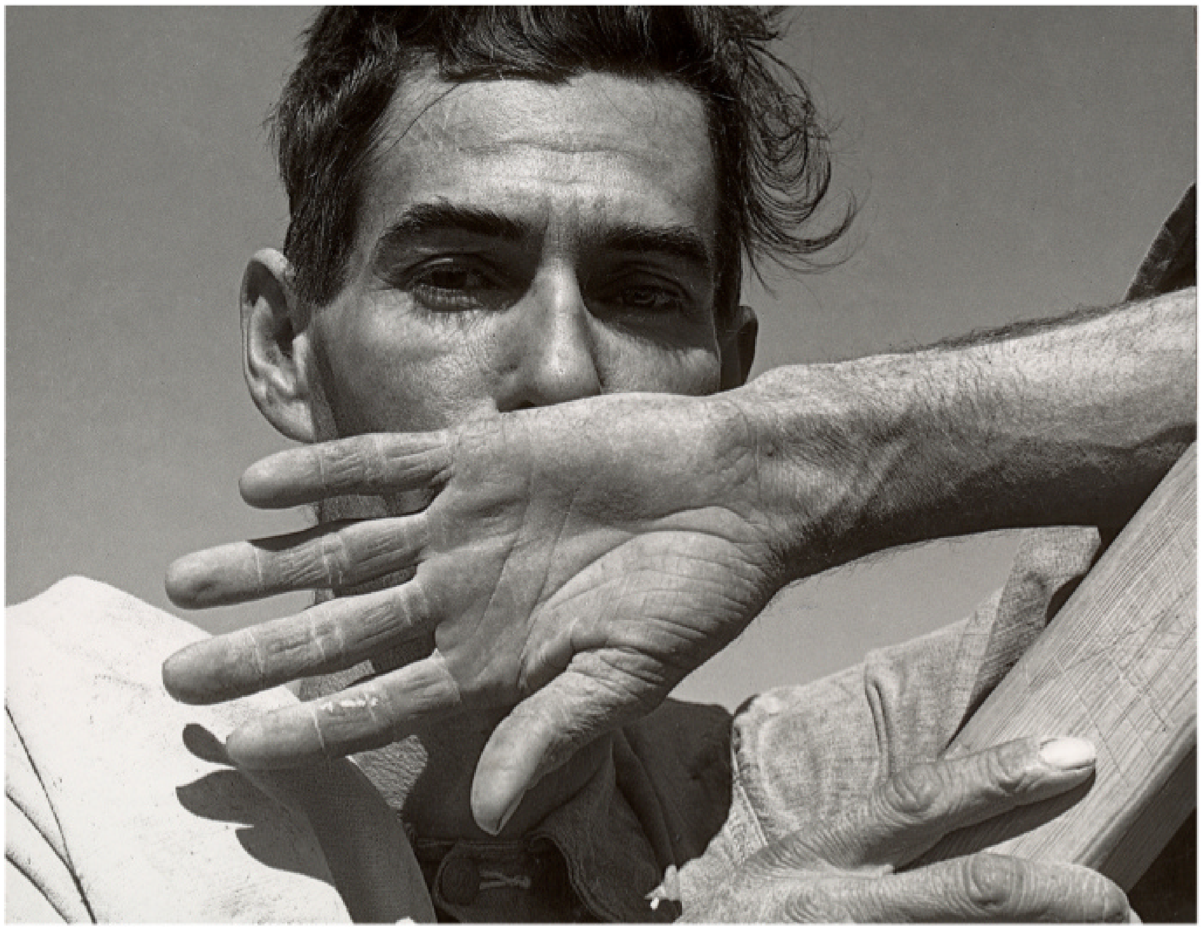
ART

“A New MOMA”

Museum of Modern Art

The Vatican, Kremlin, and Valhalla of modernism has reopened, after an expansion that adds forty-seven thousand square feet and many new galleries. Far more, though still a fraction, of MOMA’s nonpareil collection is now on display, arranged roughly chronologically but studded with such mutually provoking juxtapositions as a 1967 painting that fantasizes a race riot, by the African-American artist Faith Ringgold, with Picasso’s gospel “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon” (1907). Some of the rehangs electrify, notably in the first room of the permanent collection, where a sequence of Symbolist work—by the likes of Redon, Vuillard, Ensor, Munch, Gauguin, and Henri Rousseau—leaps, after a de-rigueur pause for van Gogh, to Cézanne, who comes off more than ever as revolutionary. (The room also has six lyrical ceramics by George E. Ohr, the nineteenth-century “Mad Potter of Biloxi”—one of several invigorating nods to formerly scanted outsiders.) Piet Mondrian’s “Broadway Boogie-Woogie” (1942-43) is freshly recontextualized as an outrigger to an eye-opening historical show of Latin-American art, which includes work by the ingenious Brazilians Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica. The best time to visit the revamped MOMA is your first, punctuated with reintroductions to old artistic companions. Masterpieces dulled by overfamiliarity in an account that had become as rote as a college textbook spring to second lives by being repositioned.—*Peter Schjeldahl (Ongoing.)*

IN THE MUSEUMS



COURTESY THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

Dorothea Lange took the powerful portrait “Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona” (above) while on assignment for the Department of Agriculture in 1940. (Imagine the current Administration hiring artists to expose the plight of the working poor.) The photographer began her influential thirty-year career as a social crusader doing field work with her husband, the economist Paul Taylor, and producing reports that the government handed out to promote the New Deal. Language—including the handwritten notes that accompanied her pictures—was central to Lange’s project, and the exhibition **“Dorothea Lange: Words & Pictures”** (at MOMA, through May 7), deftly curated by Sarah Hermanson Meister, gives equal respect to her photographic prints (ninety-six) and her publications (seven, in handsome shadow boxes and vitrines). Her best-known images are of indelible faces in hardscrabble places; an entire wall of the show is devoted to Florence Owens Thompson, the subject of Lange’s famous “Migrant Mother,” taken in 1936. But she also had a humane eye for text, like the hand-painted sign she encountered at a California gas station in 1938: “This is your country don’t let the big men take it away from you.”—*Andrea K. Scott*

Darren Bader

Whitney Museum

The oldest known still-lifes are ancient Egyptian—frescoes of figs for the afterlife. The Assyrians carved pomegranates from ivory. And so it continued, from Caravaggio’s grapes to Cézanne’s apples. In the mid-twentieth century, produce became a material, not just a subject. In 1962, the Fluxus artist Alison Knowles wrote a simple score for a performance: “Make a Salad.” The greens can serve dozens or hundreds. On the eighth floor of the Whitney, the sharp-witted New York Conceptualist Darren Bader offers food for thought in the variable installation “Fruits, Vegetables: Fruit and Vegetable Salad.” (The museum acquired the undated piece in 2015.) Forty pedestals are topped with a visually striking variety of edible readymades, which on a recent visit included a kumquat, an artichoke, rainbow chard, an aloe leaf, and a pineapple. Every two days (before they spoil), the sculptures transubstantiate into ingredients when a team from the nearby restaurant Untitled chops them into a superbly weird salad.—*Andrea K. Scott (Through Feb. 17.)*

“Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars, 1991-2011”

MOMA PS1

Might art afford new things to know and new ways to feel about matters that are so dismaying and depressing that they hobble the brain and lock down the heart? Not really. That’s the sour news in this museum-wide show of more than two hundred and fifty contemporary works, which is complicated by tangential sensations of grotesquerie and elegance, fury and poignance, and, perhaps, philosophical insight. Most informative are the ruggedly handmade *dafatir* (notebooks) by Iraqi artists, whose struggle to make art becomes a subject in itself. “She/He Has No Picture,” from 2019, by the superb painter Hanaa Malallah (who immigrated to the U.K. in 2006), amplifies the *dafatir* aesthetic in a wall-filling array of portraits on scorched canvas, depicting some of the more than four hundred civilians who were killed, in 1991, in an air-raid shelter by a U.S. “bunker buster” bomb. Such raw authenticity clashes with the comfortable sophistication of works by European and American artists who respond far more to media reportage of the wars than to the wars themselves. Exceptions include the British graphic artist Sue Coe, who finds focus for her classic Expressionism and her lifelong sorrow and anger at human barbarities. But, for the most part, a sort of clammy vicariousness reigns.—*P.S. (Through March 1.)*

Takuji Hamanaka

Lorello

DOWNTOWN Only close inspection reveals that this artist’s airy, geometric abstractions are meticulously collaged rather than drawn. Hamanaka, who was born on Hokkaido, Japan, and lives in Brooklyn, prints his tiny pastel shapes with hand-inked woodblocks—the same *bokashi* technique favored by the nineteenth-century masters Hokusai and Hiroshige, who used it to achieve the color gradients of their landscapes. This delightful small show features seven subtly pulsating works, including irregular lattices that evoke the veins on a leaf and rippling patterns that conjure water. The most spine-tingling example of the delicately trippy, almost holographic effects that Hamanaka achieves is "Windows in a Foreign Shore," from 2019, whose apertures suggest both craggy caves in a cliff face and the façade of an uncanny skyscraper.—*Johanna Fateman (Through Feb. 22.)*

Farah Al Qasimi

Public Art Fund

CITYWIDE For most people, public transportation in New York City disproves a cliché: it's about the destination, not the journey. It takes the mind of an artist to see a bus route and think of a party. When the Public Art Fund invited this Emirati photographer to conceive of a project for spaces (usually reserved for advertisements) on a hundred bus shelters across the five boroughs, she came up with "Back and Forth Disco," a series of seventeen effervescent color pictures, taken in neighborhoods throughout the city. Whether she is documenting a chandelier in a Yemeni-owned bodega in Ridgewood, Queens, or two men in a barbershop run by Palestinians in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, Qasimi puts a jubilant spin on living between cultures, as so many New Yorkers do. The pictures arrive as a gorgeous, if inadvertent, retort to the newly increased restrictions of Trump's travel ban. In a city of immigrants, Qasimi reminds us that every here is also an elsewhere.—*A.K.S. (Through May 17.)*

Jackie Saccoccio

Van Doren Waxter

UPTOWN A good abstract painting can seem inevitable—less made than materialized, like a Helen Frankenthaler stain or the squalls of Joan Mitchell. For thirty years, this American painter has been collaborating with chance on her compositions, pouring oil, scumbling dry pigment, dragging one canvas across another, and rattling, turning, and otherwise performing her surfaces until the results make the laws of gravity appear moot. In "Femme Brut," Saccoccio's new show (which continues at Chart, in Tribeca), the artist introduces an old-fashioned technique: drawing directly onto her paintings, with oil pastel, in furious cursive bursts. Several of these big, ambitious pieces, including "Le Puits Noir (Concave)" allude to the landscapes of Gustave Courbet—a suggestion, perhaps, that the only distinction between realism and abstraction is how an artist handles her paint.—*A.K.S. (Through March 14.)*

"Acquired on eBay"

Algus

DOWNTOWN Low-budget collecting—the result of the gallerist Mitchell Algus's online research into artists of mysterious origins and minor reputations—is the generative curatorial premise of this wildly eclectic exhibition. The stark landscape "Gray Day," from 1927, by Aline Meyer Leibman, whose paintings were championed by Alfred Stieglitz, was acquired for just two hundred and twenty-five dollars on eBay. A 1958 canvas featuring a lithe figure in a fantastic forest, by the African-American Surrealist James Wilson Edwards, was discovered at an estate sale, and Raoul Ubac's 1938 photographs of mannequins designed by Max Ernst and Salvador Dali were obtained from an art dealer's storage space, which was "dispersed by a relative," according to the exhibition checklist. This dense arrangement of bargain treasures makes a point about the irrational vagaries of the art market, but more interesting are the surprising social, sexual, and aesthetic connections that Algus draws through his savvy juxtapositions and with the display of related books and ephemera.—*J.F. (Through Feb. 23.)*

"Souls Grown Diaspora"

Apexart

DOWNTOWN This lively, jam-packed exhibition, curated by Sam Gordon, features ten African-American artists, most of whom are self-taught. About half of them are performers, too: music fills the gallery. Highlights include tracks by the jazz singer Stephanie Crawford, whose lovely still-lifes of flowers and of boxes of chocolates occupy one wall. Other works range from the speculative (Raynes Birkbeck's canvases referencing extraterrestrial narratives) to the political (Dapper Bruce Lafitte's detailed cartographic drawings of a post-Katrina New Orleans). But assemblage is one shared theme, as seen in the mixed-media portraits of the Reverend Joyce McDonald, which incorporate clay, beads, African textiles, and, in one particularly beautiful piece, aluminum foil. Curtis Cuffie, who is best known for his elaborate public installations in the East Village, is represented here by smaller works, such as a shard of lucite held in a vise. In bringing these remarkable works into the same easy conversation, Gordon undercuts stale assumptions about so-called outsider artists while establishing a vibrant alternative lineage.—*J.F. (Through March 7.)*

NIGHT LIFE

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

Vanguard Jazz Orchestra

Village Vanguard

Until the sixties, Monday nights were a jazz wasteland, as most clubs would shutter to cool off after the weekend. But then the polymathic brass man Thad Jones and the drummer Mel Lewis formed a big band in order to kick off the week in style at the Village Vanguard. Fifty-four years later, the group, now dubbed the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, has outlived both its founders and numerous star soloists, yet it has lost none of its vigor or tonal lustre. As is now the custom, the durable ensemble gets a full week to celebrate its remarkable longevity.—*Steve Futterman (Feb. 11-16.)*

Jonah Parzen-Johnson

Nublu 151

Jonah Parzen-Johnson milks the baritone saxophone not only for its air of loneliness but also for its less fabled comedic undertones: his music can conjure an image of somebody dancing alone—forlorn but with a goofy swagger. On his new LP, "Imagine Giving Up," Parzen-Johnson accompanies himself on an analog synthesizer, which he commands with his feet onstage. With each drone and sputter of the synth, he drifts away from his jazz background toward a less defined terrain that suggests Brian Eno, film soundtracks, and the spaces between.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Feb. 12.)*

Dawn

Mercury Lounge

Though Dawn Richard might be best known as a member of the pop group Danity Kane, she's had several different lives as a musician. Last year, on her album "new breed," she went back to the beginning, drawing on her childhood in New Orleans to stitch a patchwork of electric R. & B. that's as poignant as it is eviscerating. When she calls out powerful men who have demeaned her, on the track "Spaces," she embraces the most primal version of herself: "The girl from the nine said fuck them."—*Julyssa Lopez (Feb. 13.)*

Cosmodelica + Love Injection

Public Records

Colleen (Cosmo) Murphy is one of d.j. culture's most diligent scholars, having collaborated with the late David Mancuso on his latter-day loft parties in London. Here, Murphy has fitting company in Paul Raffaele and Barbie Bertisch, who publish the charming monthly fanzine Love Injection. All three tend toward loose grooves, melodic lines overlapping into Op-art patterns, and a rangy floridness that seems designed to help dancers shake their psyches as much as their limbs.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Feb. 14.)*

Joanne Brackeen

Mezzrow

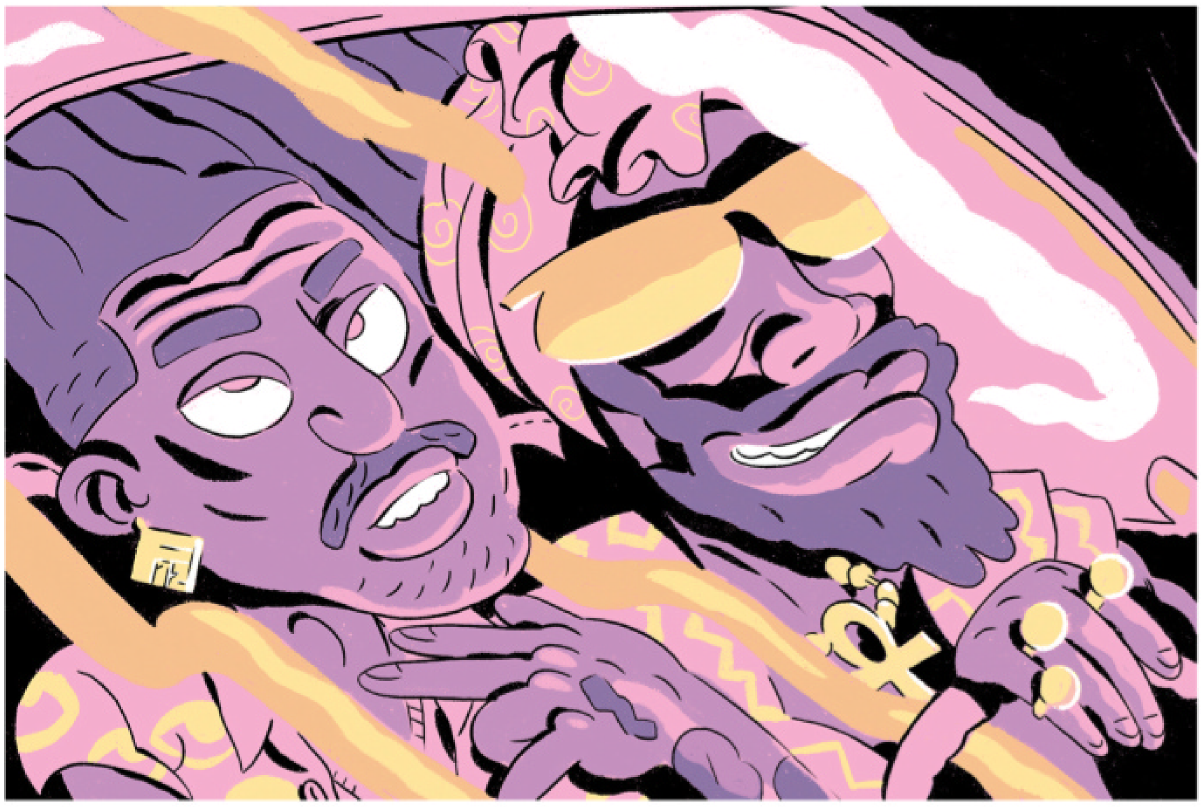
Though female jazz instrumentalists now appear on bandstands and in recording sessions more often than they used to, it's imperative to acknowledge the time—not so long ago—when a gifted pianist such as Joanne Brackeen could make news just by virtue of her presence on the male-dominated scene. Brackeen, who received an N.E.A. Jazz Masters award in 2018, remains a formidable post-bop improviser and composer; her skills will be on view in this duet with the responsive bassist Ugonna Okegwo. Also playing: Once a specialist in early jazz piano, Ehud Asherie has since broadened his scope; he performs, Feb. 21-22, with a trio that includes the drummer Willie Jones III.—*S.F. (Feb. 14-15.)*

Classixx

Elsewhere

The limpid saxophone solo, redolent of eighties High Street fashion, will always have a place on the dance floor if the Los Angeles duo Classixx has anything to say about it. Michael David and Tyler Blake's relaxed disco stomp and heavily filtered hooks emit the bawdy suavity of Parisian house; in December, they

HIP-HOP



It's natural to want to compare **EarthGang** to OutKast: both duos, both from Atlanta, both cut their hip-hop equally with soul and idiosyncrasies. But it would be a disservice not to meet the younger pair on their own terms; they carry the torch rather than shrink in its shadow. Using Southern culture, aesthetics, and values as a rule, EarthGang—who perform Feb. 13 at Warsaw, in Brooklyn, and Feb. 14 at Gramercy Theatre, in Manhattan—orient their music around the storied legacies of Afrofuturism and fantasy. "Mirrorland," their début album, from September, is at once space-age and down-home. On it, they bask in a freewheeling eclecticism, playing with sounds and textures as they pay homage to their home town, which they've affectionately dubbed the Land of Oz, in reference to one of the record's primary inspirations, the classic film "The Wiz": "It's black people just being unafraid and unapologetically creative."—*Briana Younger*

dedicated a live remake of their single "Love Me No More" to the late French producer Phillippe Zdar.—*M.M. (Feb. 15.)*

El Gran Combo
Radio City Music Hall

Puerto Rico has long been home to some of the biggest commercial smashes in contemporary salsa, and a showcase at Radio City brings in three heavy hitters to continue the decades-long musical dialogue. The central draw is El Gran Combo, the nearly sixty-year-old orchestra often touted as the world's most successful salsa group; the legendary Tito Nieves and the romancer Jerry Rivera make it an even higher-wattage night.—*J.L. (Feb. 15.)*

Sahba Motallebi & Rahim AlHaj
Merkin Hall

The musical traditions of Iran and Iraq stretch back centuries, and improvisation is built into the music-making of both cultures, allowing contemporary string virtuosos such as Sahba Motallebi (she plays the tar, a Persian lute) and Rahim AlHaj (an oud practitioner, once a political prisoner in his native Baghdad) to tinge these ancient modes with shades of modernity. Playing separately and together in a remarkable, one-of-a-kind concert, both honor the roads they've travelled from the war-torn Middle East to renown in the West.—*K. Leander Williams (Feb. 15.)*

"The Thrill Is Gone"
Capitol Theatre

Although B.B. King died in 2015, the blues doyen was an unfailing stage presence for so many decades that it can be hard to remember that he's no longer on the road. This whopping two-night tribute concert enlists an army of artists to fill the void. Spread across two distinct bills, performers include the steel-guitar whiz Robert Randolph, the deliciously randy blues veteran Bobby Rush, the soul crooner Anthony Hamilton, and the singular Buddy Guy, the wildfire guitarist who currently wears the genre's crown.—*J.R. (Feb. 16-17.)*

U.S. Girls
The Dance

Where experimental musicians may tend to accompany outré sounds with vague lyrics and a rejection of pageantry, U.S. Girls flip the script, performing glassy, danceable pop songs that smolder with radical undercurrents. The group is the brainchild of Toronto's Meg Remy, and its music can be impenetrable—and sometimes seem misguided—but rarely fails to intrigue. A forthcoming album, "Heavy Light," employs disco, spoken word, and a bona-fide E Street Band member to dive into Remy's professed theme of retrospection; deep thoughts lurk behind its every beat.—*J.R. (Feb. 18.)*

Jill Scott
Radio City Music Hall

July will mark the twentieth anniversary of "Who Is Jill Scott? Words and Sounds Vol. 1," Jill Scott's staggering début, and, in honor of the occasion, the singer is setting out on tour. The album, which matches an around-the-way-girl lyricism with the sensuality and soul of Scott's showstopping voice, has held up well over the years—the emotional and carnal ecstasies of love and the roller coaster of heartbreak will always be universal. Scott, who has since made a foray into Hollywood, remains ever iconic.—*Briana Younger (Feb. 20.)*

Trio 3
Jazz Standard

The saxophonist Oliver Lake, the bassist Reggie Workman, and the drummer Andrew Cyrille—all veterans of a heady era when the basic conventions of jazz were morphing into challenging new forms—have now convened as Trio 3. For this engagement, they're joined by Vijay Iyer, David Virelles, Marilyn Crispell, and Jason Moran, four of the most flexible and adventurous pianists working today, for an intergenerational meeting of aligned spirits.—*S.F. (Feb. 20-23.)*

Fatoumata Diawara
Town Hall

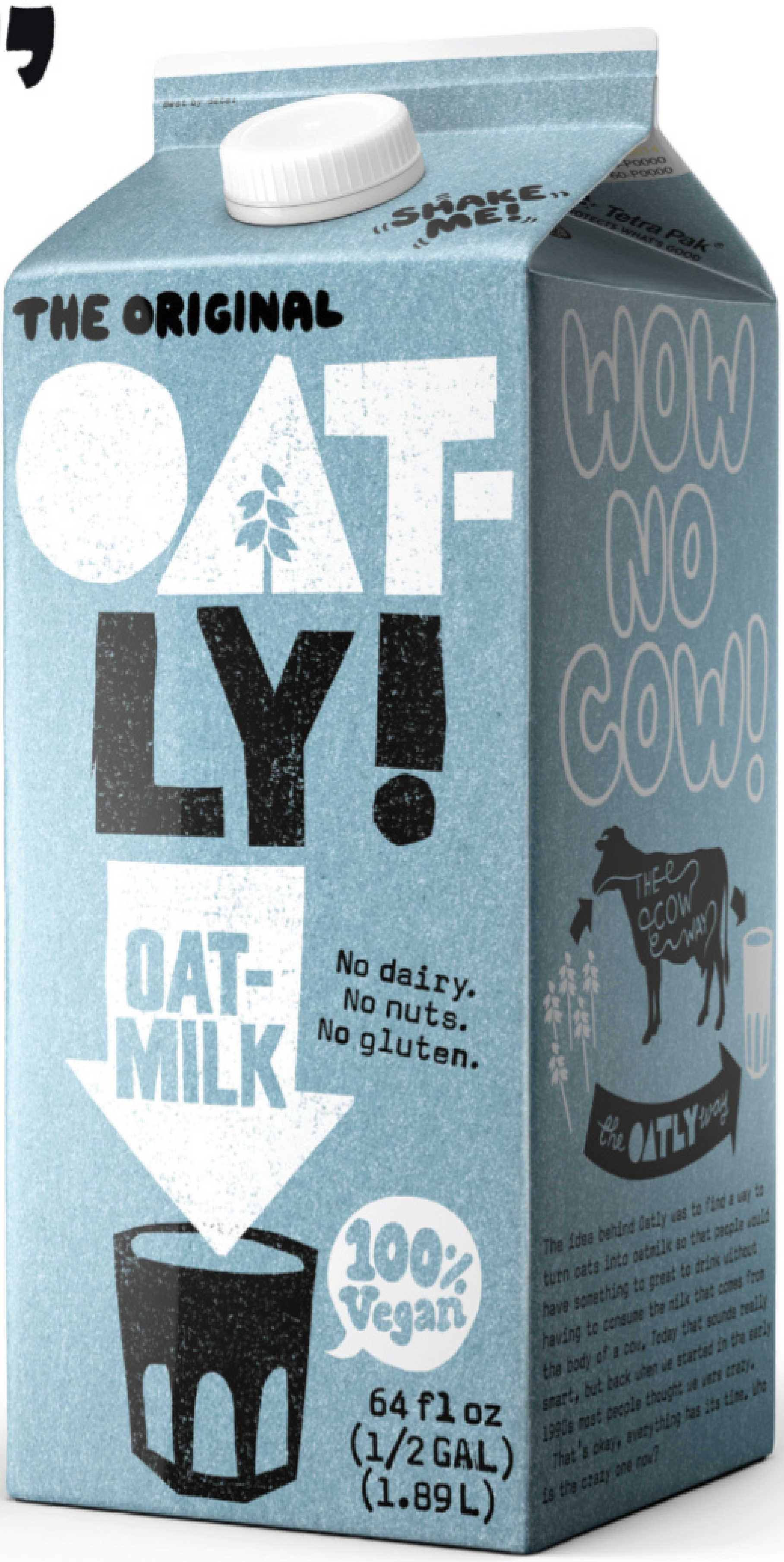
Fatoumata Diawara's videos are hyper-vivid and screaming with color, but, even if you were to remove the visual elements from her work, the Malian artist's music would still be luminous. Her Grammy-nominated album, "Fenfo," from 2018, is a clear example of how she embraces brightness: she amplifies African rhythms and Wassoulou traditions of storytelling with her deep, commanding voice and unrelenting electric guitars, which rip through her songs like beautiful streaks of lightning.—*J.L. (Feb. 21.)*

Kojey Radical
Baby's All Right

"Man upon a mission, still a martyr for the vision," the British-Ghanaian rapper Kojey Radical announces in the opening seconds of his EP "Cashmere Tears." That sense of hunger mixed with grand purpose underlies the project, which expertly blends hip-hop

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN PASSMORE

“This tastes like sh*t! Blah!”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That’s a real comment from a real person who tried one of our oatmilks for the first time. Some people just don’t like it. They think it tastes like oats, because it does taste like oats. Here’s the good part. If you don’t like the taste of our oatmilks, you don’t have to drink them. Taste is personal which is why we don’t take it personal if you don’t like how they taste.

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with tinges of triumphant funk and churning gospel. During the past few years, London has emerged as a hotbed of unique and varied styles of rap, and Radical, who is also a poet and a visual artist, is poised to be its next great champion.—*B.Y. (Feb. 24.)*

DANCE

New York City Ballet
David H. Koch

Where would the art of ballet be without "Swan Lake"? Even this company, not known for its allegiance to evening-length story ballets, has a version (which it will perform Feb. 14-23). This staging dates back to 1996, when Peter Martins—the company's former artistic director—created it for the Royal Danish Ballet. (A bit of trivia: the choreographer Alexei Ratmansky danced it when he was a member of the Danish company, in the nineties.) Three years later, Martins brought it to N.Y.C.B. The staging is swift and a bit dry, and it includes a second virtuoso male role, for a pesky jester who flits about the stage in great, flying leaps. It also includes some choreography by Balanchine, from a previous, one-act version. The abstract, color-coded designs are by the Danish painter Per Kirkeby.—*Marina Harss (Through March 1.)*

Che Malambo
Joyce Theatre

The men of Che Malambo charge like a stampede and dance like cowboys—the Argentine kind. Malambo, a centuries-old gaucho style, is competitive and macho. Heads and torsos ride haughtily over legs that buck, twist, and beat out rhythms, often ostentatiously on the rims of boots. Drums slung over shoulders sometimes take up the beat, as do *boleadoras*, weights attached to ropes that are thrown to ensnare cattle on the run. These tools, swung like lassos or jump ropes or yo-yos, are visually spectacular musical instruments, whipping the air and striking the ground. Imagine a stage full of those whirring implements, some held between teeth, and you get a sense of why the roars of this troupe of twelve sexy, sweaty guys, directed by the French choreographer Gilles Brinas, are usually answered by whoops.—*Brian Seibert (Feb. 11-16.)*

POSTMODERN DANCE

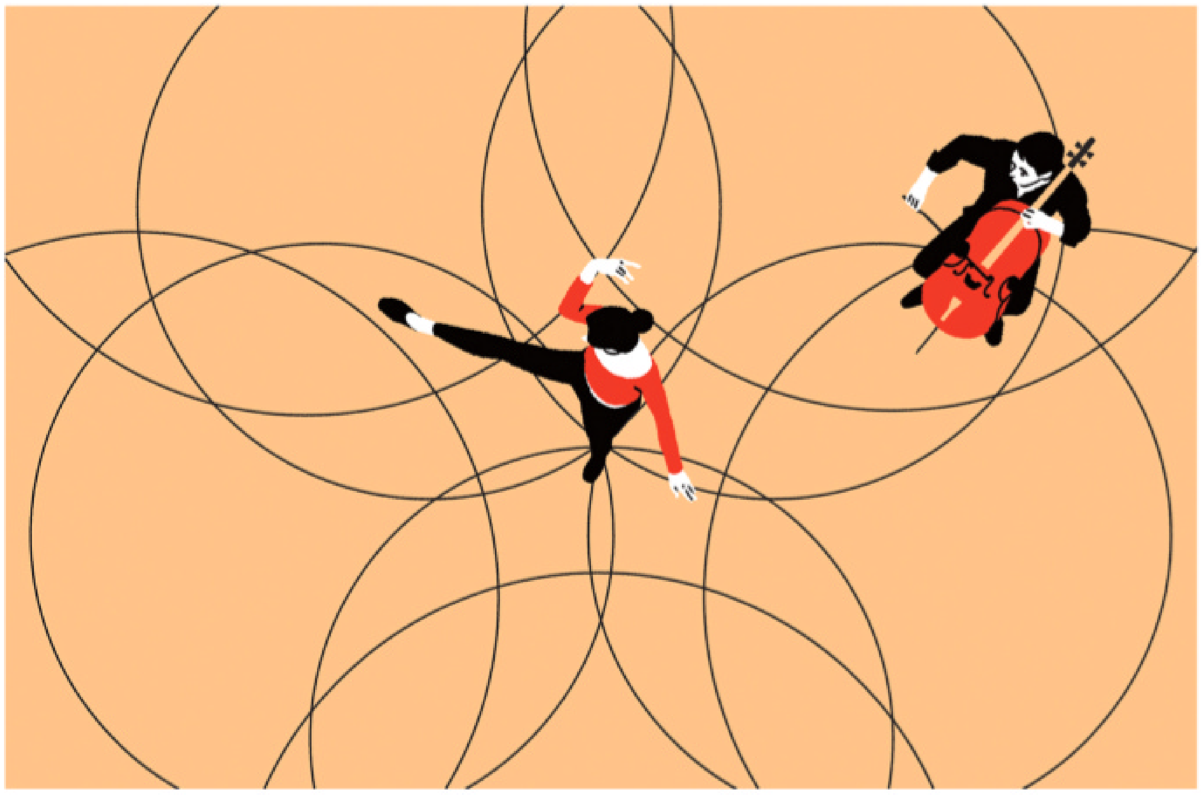

ILLUSTRATION BY SUA BALAC

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker doesn't lack chutzpah. She's the Belgian choreographer who, for the revival of "West Side Story" currently on Broadway, has replaced the original Jerome Robbins choreography with her own radically different stuff. A similar boldness underlies "Mitten Wir im Leben Sind" ("In the Midst of Life"), a 2017 work that has its North American première at N.Y.U. Skirball, Feb. 13-15. It's set to Bach's suites for solo cello, all six in a row, and lasts two attention-taxing hours, without an intermission. Compounding the audacity, the choreography is in De Keersmaeker's most austere, pedestrian mode, all walks and runs and pivots. (De Keersmaeker, who is fifty-nine, is one of the five dancers.) But the cellist, Jean-Guihen Queyras, is deeply versed in the score and up for the marathon. And, if the steps look plain, their design is firm and considered. The dance of alignment and friction between Bach and the Belgian postmodernist can clarify both.—*Brian Seibert*

NYTB / Chamber Works
Danspace Project

Being a small company doesn't mean having small ambitions, as the troupe formerly known as New York Theatre Ballet has proved time and again. For this program, the British modern-dance choreographer Richard Alston has adapted an older work, a quartet set to Ravel, now called "The Small Sonata." Robert La Fosse, who danced at both American Ballet Theatre and New York City Ballet, has put together a new version of Stravinsky's macabre morality play "The Soldier's Tale," with the well-known downtown performance artist John Kelly playing the Devil. Another première, "Uncaged," by Antonia Franceschi, explores the visual world of the painter Lee Krasner. And the company is reviving "Double Andante," by Pam Tanowitz, whose style, reminiscent of Merce Cunningham's, combines rigor and eccentricity.—*M.H. (Feb. 13-15.)*

Irina Kolesnikova
BAM Howard Gilman Opera House

St. Petersburg Ballet Theatre, not to be confused with the St. Petersburg-based Mariinsky Ballet, is a touring ensemble that specializes in ballet classics as well as contemporary ballets. Many of its dancers, including its star ballerina Irina Kolesnikova, are graduates of the Vaganova Academy, the city's prestigious ballet school. At BAM, Kolesnikova dances the lead role in "Swan Lake," partnered by Denis Rodkin, of the Bolshoi. The troupe usually travels with its own orchestra, but here it will be accompanied by the Chamber Orchestra of New York.—*M.H. (Feb. 15-16.)*

Compagnie Hervé Koubi
Joyce Theatre

This troupe—a bunch of strapping guys from North Africa and Burkina Faso, always shirtless, who can spin on their hands and their heads and catapult one another high in the air—has an obvious appeal. The surprise is its restraint, a habitual slowness that's poetically absorbing—until it proves aesthetically stuck. In "Les nuits barbares, ou les premiers matins du monde," the company counters the fear of foreigners with an identity that transcends borders. Metallic ears on bejewelled masks are removed and wielded like knives as the men face off to sacred music by Mozart and Fauré, but no one gets hurt.—*B.S. (Feb. 18-23.)*

Richard Alston Dance Company
Alexander Kasser Theatre

Recently knighted, Alston has long been an establishment figure in British modern dance, admired for his detailed musicality and his old-school craftsmanship. So it was a bit of a shock when he announced, in 2018, that funding cuts were forcing him to shut down his company. For its last show in the U.S., at Peak Performances, in Montclair, New Jersey, the troupe brings a program that's all new or very recent, including "Brahms

ON BROADWAY

The last time Broadway contemplated the music and the mood of Bob Dylan was in 2006, when Twyla Tharp directed and choreographed the surreal dance-driven piece "The Times They Are A-Changin'," set at a circus. (It opened and closed in less than a month.) A new Dylan musical, **"Girl from the North Country,"** is similarly detached from direct biography, as perhaps befits an artist so resistant to categorization. But its tone is defiantly not circus-like. The playwright Conor MacPherson sets the story at a boarding house in Depression-era Duluth—Dylan's birthplace, before his birth—where money and luck are in short supply. The show, which McPherson also directs, has played in London's West End and downtown, at the Public Theatre. It will be at the Belasco starting Feb. 7.—*Michael Schulman*

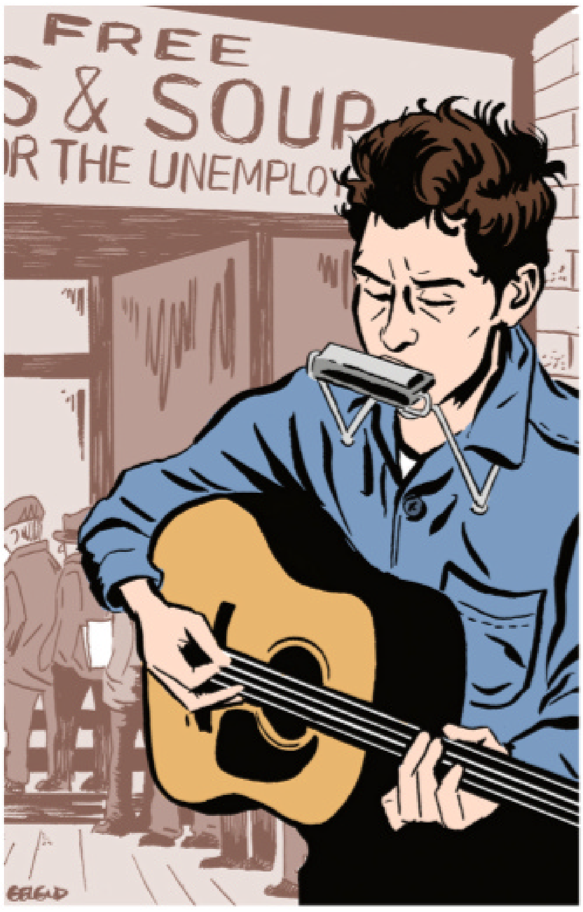

ILLUSTRATION BY NATHAN GELGUD

Hungarian" and "Voices and Light Footsteps," set to Monteverdi. "Shine On," Alston's final work for the troupe, is set to Britten's early song cycle "On This Island," performed live by the soprano Gelsey Bell and the pianist Jason Ridgway.—*B.S. (Feb. 20-23.)*

Jaewoo Jung
92nd Street Y

The 92nd Street Y's Harkness Dance Festival kicks off with this rising Korean choreographer. An alum of the innovative company Bereishit, Jaewoo has founded his own collaborative, Braveman. In the solo "uninhabited island," you can see his admiration for Buster Keaton, as he mimes inflating himself and being blown about or makes two of his fingers into runaway puppets. Impressively lithe, Jaewoo is not quite funny, but the ensemble piece "Perfect Skill," in which the dancers of Braveman irregularly illuminate one another with flashlights, tumbles into farce.—*B.S. (Feb. 21-22.)*

Florentina Holzinger
N.Y.U. Skirball

"Apollon," by this Vienna-born, Netherlands-based provocateur, riffs in part on George Balanchine's 1928 work "Apollo" and its balletic ideals; the original male god and three female muses are replaced by a cast that's all female and in the buff. But that's merely one scene among many in this feminist freak show. Here Apollo is a mechanical bull that the women ride for pleasure and dismantle. There's also treadmill running, weight lifting, playful self-mutilation, dildo use, defecation, and coprophagia—all to show how badass these bare-assed women can be.—*B.S. (Feb. 22-23.)*

Works & Process
Guggenheim Museum

Two days offer two different presentations at this behind-the-scenes series. In 2015, the former American Ballet Theatre star Angel Corella took over the Pennsylvania Ballet. The Spanish-born dancer has been busily transforming the troupe's repertory; his latest addition is a new version of "La Bayadère," a late-nineteenth-century ballet set in an exotic version of ancient India and centered on the love between a temple dancer and a handsome warrior. How does one stage such a ballet in 2020? On Feb. 23, Corella will discuss this question with the diversity advocate Phil Chan, and a handful of dancers from the company will show excerpts of the new production. The following day, the choreographer and tap dancer Caleb Teicher offers a peek at "Swing 2020," a new show he is developing for the Joyce Theatre. The project explores the Lindy Hop, the swinging American social dance born in Harlem in the late twenties. This lively Guggenheim program will include Lindy-hoppers and a six-piece jazz band.—*M.H. (Feb. 23-24.)*

THE THEATRE

Beyond Babel
Gym at Judson

The choreographers Keone and Mari Madrid, a married couple based in San Diego, have showcased their "urban dance" style—essentially a flowing variation of hip-hop—on television and in Justin Bieber's slyly poetic music video for "Love Yourself." But this new production, which the Madrids co-created (with Josh and Lyndsay Aviner) and star in, is an evening-length dance-theatre work set to contemporary songs, and it quickly gets repetitive. The creators and their ten-member ensemble are stunning dancers and athletes, but the narrative—very loosely inspired by "Romeo and Juliet"—is as slack as the movements are precise. The performers use props until the second act, climbing and jumping off boxes and movable chain-link-fence panels. (The scenic design is by London Kaye.) Ultimately, it's the Madrids who shine brightest, especially in a falling-in-love sequence, set to alt-J's "Warm Foothills," and, toward the end of the show, in a tragic pas de deux.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through March 29.)*

Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice
Pershing Square Signature Center

It's 1969, the sexual revolution is in full bloom, and Bob (Joél Pérez) and Carol (Jennifer Damiano) are undergoing a spiritual metamorphosis at a clothing-optional retreat in California. A weekend of Tai Chi, hypnotic massages, and primal-scream therapy has propelled the married couple to heretofore unknown peaks of self-discovery. Newly enlightened, they embrace polyamory. This does not sit well with Ted (Michael Zegen) and Alice (Ana Nogueira), their buttoned-up best friends, who view the au-courant relaxing of conjugal boundaries with a mixture of pity and alarm. The transgressive and funny movie version, directed, fifty years ago, by Paul Mazursky, is reborn here as a deliciously zany musical, directed by Scott Elliott for the New Group, with deliberately groovy tunes by Duncan Sheik and Amanda Green (featuring Suzanne Vega as the Band Leader) and a book by Jonathan Marc Sherman. The perennial questions the work explores—about love, desire, and commitment—still resonate, and remain unanswered, even if the subject matter no longer shocks. In the age of cuddle parties and swiping right, are we laughing at Mazursky's New Age libertines or celebrating them?—*David Kortava (Through March 22.)*

Border People
A.R.T./New York Theatres

In this one-man show, directed by Nicole A. Watson, Dan Hoyle depicts a series of people—including a Saudi man in Canada, an Iraqi woman in Pennsylvania, and many men who have been deported from the U.S. to Mexico—whose experiences relate to borders (although it's unclear how several African-American characters from Hoyle's own Bronx neighborhood fit into that concept). Hoyle's script, based on interviews, broadly resembles the approach of such writer-performers as Anna Deavere Smith and Nilaja Sun, who take on a big cast of characters with a wide variety of voices and backgrounds. But this sort of thing comes across very differently when the performer is white, as Hoyle is. And he makes a meal out of accents and body language, in a hyperbolic style that doesn't just undermine his good intentions but verges, unfortunately, on minstrelsy.—*Rollo Romig (Through Feb. 22.)*

The Good Soul of Setzuan
Irondale Centre

In this Irondale Company production, performed at the troupe's ramshackle space (a former Sunday school), in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, the director Jim Niesen makes Bertolt Brecht's 1941 play, about the difficulty of being neighborly, feel, in a warm and winning way, like a neighborhood show. Using David Harrower's translation, but with new music (by Sam Day Harmet, played charmingly by a three-piece house band), on a set (by Ken Rothchild) made to look like Brecht's workroom, the cast of six pretends to use whatever's at hand as costumes and props: hats from the office coatrack, pretzel sticks for cigars. They play it so loose that the show starts to flag a bit around the middle, but it's enchanting to watch it come together.—*R.R. (Through Feb. 22.)*

Mac Beth
Frederick Loewe Theatre

In "Mac Beth," adapted from Shakespeare's play and directed by Erica Schmidt, for the Hunter Theatre Project, a group of schoolgirls perform the drama in a junk-strewn forest clearing as a high-concept joke among friends. As Shakespeare's story unspools, we see the girls trying on poses, finding in words several centuries old a strangely neat container for feelings that they only faintly knew could be expressed. When Lady Macbeth (an ardent, intelligent Ismenia Mendes) wishes to be "unsexed," and Macduff (Camila Canó-Flaviá) declares a need to "feel" her child's death "like a man," we hear these as desires for yet more expressive range, as imagined extensions of what it means to act. Brittany Bradford is astounding as Macbeth. She's got a hard job: she has to be the paranoid Scot and a nervously charismatic kid, an old mask and a naked face, fact and fiction, all at once. She's looking for the kind of control that we all grasp at, and fail to hold on to for long.—*Vinson Cunningham (Reviewed in our issue of 2/10/20.) (Through Feb. 22.)*

Medea
BAM Harvey Theatre

In this new "Medea," based on Euripides' classic, written and directed by Simon Stone, Anna (the subtly soulful Rose Byrne) and Lucas (Bobby Cannavale) are a married couple, both scientists by trade, reunited when Anna is released from a mental institution. She was sent there after being caught trying to gradually kill Lucas by slipping trace amounts of poison into his dinner. Returned home, Anna is anxious to win Lucas back, but her desire is delusional: this whole cycle started when Anna found a bouquet of sexts—to Clara (Madeline Weinstein), the young daughter of Anna and Lucas's boss, Christopher (Dylan Baker)—on Lucas's phone. A solid, surprisingly graceful presence onstage, Cannavale moves like a linebacker with a background in modern dance. Byrne's Anna feels as real and as horrifying as the evening news, ready to do something she can't undo, make a stain you could never scrub out.—*V.C. (2/10/20) (Through March 8.)*

Stew
Walkerspace

The kitchen as a communal space has been done before—dramas about women cooking while tensions bubble to the surface. And yet Page 73's "Stew," by Zora Howard, feels familiar without being cliché, delivering a captivating story that's intimate, funny, and heartbreaking in equal measure. Mama (Portia) is making a huge stew for a church gathering; a domineering presence, she snaps and purses her lips, micromanaging her daughters, Lillian (Nikkole Salter) and Nelly (Toni Lachelle Pollitt), and her granddaughter, Lil' Mama (Kristin Dodson). The men—fathers, sons, husbands, boyfriends—are mentioned but conspicuously absent, and each woman is avoiding something. The actors' performances are well matched to Howard's agile dialogue; Portia's matriarch is magnetic, with impressive command. Colette Robert's energetic direction captures the chaos of a home, full of overlapping voices and gusts of movement, all leading up to the moment when the play's façade snaps, delicately and definitively, like a bean into a bowl.—*Maya Phillips (Through Feb. 22.)*

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Melaine Dalibert
Areté Venue and Gallery

The French composer and pianist Melaine Dalibert is best known for performing his own creations, many of which are pellucid reveries derived from algorithmic sequences. But he is also a compelling interpreter of works by other composers—a point proved by his new album, which is devoted to elegantly plainspoken miniatures by Anastassis Philippakopoulos. Dalibert's recital program features that music alongside his own and pieces by Sébastien Roux and Michael Vincent Waller. (He presents a second recital on Feb. 14, at 167 Spring St.)—*Steve Smith (Feb. 13 at 7:30.)*

Bridget Kibbey and Avi Avital
Church of the Intercession

The harpist Bridget Kibbey and the mandolinist Avi Avital test the notion that their instruments can make just about any music sound sweet and romantic. Their Valentine's Day concert, which takes place in a candlelit crypt below the Church of the Intercession, features arrangements of a Bach flute sonata, song cycles by Joaquín Rodrigo ("Cuatro Madrigales Amatorios") and Manuel de Falla (the dreamy and tangy "Siete Canciones Populares Españolas"), and Marc Lavry's "Three Jewish Dances."—*Oussama Zahr (Feb. 14 at 7.)*

Jay Campbell & Conor Hanick
92nd Street Y

It boggles the mind that Jay Campbell, who plays cello for the tirelessly innovative JACK Quartet, somehow manages to find time for even more intrepid adventures outside the group's confines. Here, he partners with the superb pianist Conor Hanick for a program of world premières by Marcos Balter, Natacha Diels, and John Zorn. Also playing: The distinguished pianist Julius Drake has his hands full this week, accompanying a recital by the lustrous mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke (Feb. 13) and a duo program with the soprano Amanda Majeski and the bass-baritone Philippe Sly (Feb. 19).—*S.S. (Feb. 14 at 9.)*

"Così Fan Tutte"
Metropolitan Opera House

"Così Fan Tutte" is the most cynical of Mozart's mature operas: two friends disguise themselves to see if they can woo each other's girlfriend. Phelim McDermott's Met production, set at Coney Island, plays into the idea that love is a game, but it leaves the job of communicating the more profound sentiment of arias like "Per pietà" and "Un'aura amorosa" to the singers. Harry Bicket leads an estimable ensemble cast, including Ben Bliss and Luca Pisaroni as the friendly rivals and Heidi Stober and Gerald Finley as the couples' worldly confidants.—*O.Z. (Feb. 15 at 12:30, Feb. 18 and Feb. 21 at 7:30, and Feb. 23 at 3.)*

Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique
Carnegie Hall

For the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Beethoven's birth, Carnegie Hall has programmed two complete cycles of the composer's nine life-affirming, genre-defining symphonies. First up is John Eliot Gardiner's Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique, which, over six days, plays the pieces in chronological order using period instruments, including gut strings, valveless horns, and wooden flutes.—*O.Z. (Feb. 19-21 and Feb. 24 at 8 and Feb. 23 at 2.)*

Kirill Gerstein
Zankel Hall

A commanding pianist whose playing deftly balances physicality and personality, Kirill Gerstein comes to Carnegie Hall for a recital filled with novelty, spirit, and song. His program includes major works by Schubert ("Wanderer Fantasy") and Liszt (Sonata in B Minor), compositions based on lively Hungarian folk tunes, and a new piece extracted from Thomas Adès's opera "The Exterminating Angel."—*S.S. (Feb. 20 at 7:30.)*

Oscar Bettison
Miller Theatre

The dynamic chamber ensemble Alarm Will Sound returns to its old stomping ground at Miller Theatre for a "Composer Portrait" devoted to Oscar Bettison's kinetic music. Bettison, a British-American composer based at the Peabody Institute, in Baltimore, specializes in works of refined ferocity; this program includes two substantial examples, "Livre des Sauvage" and "Pale Icons of Night," the latter in its New York première.—*S.S. (Feb. 20 at 8.)*

Charles Curtis
Issue Project Room

Charles Curtis, a cellist whose work combines spellbinding intensity and beguiling beauty, is having a moment: in December, he anchored a

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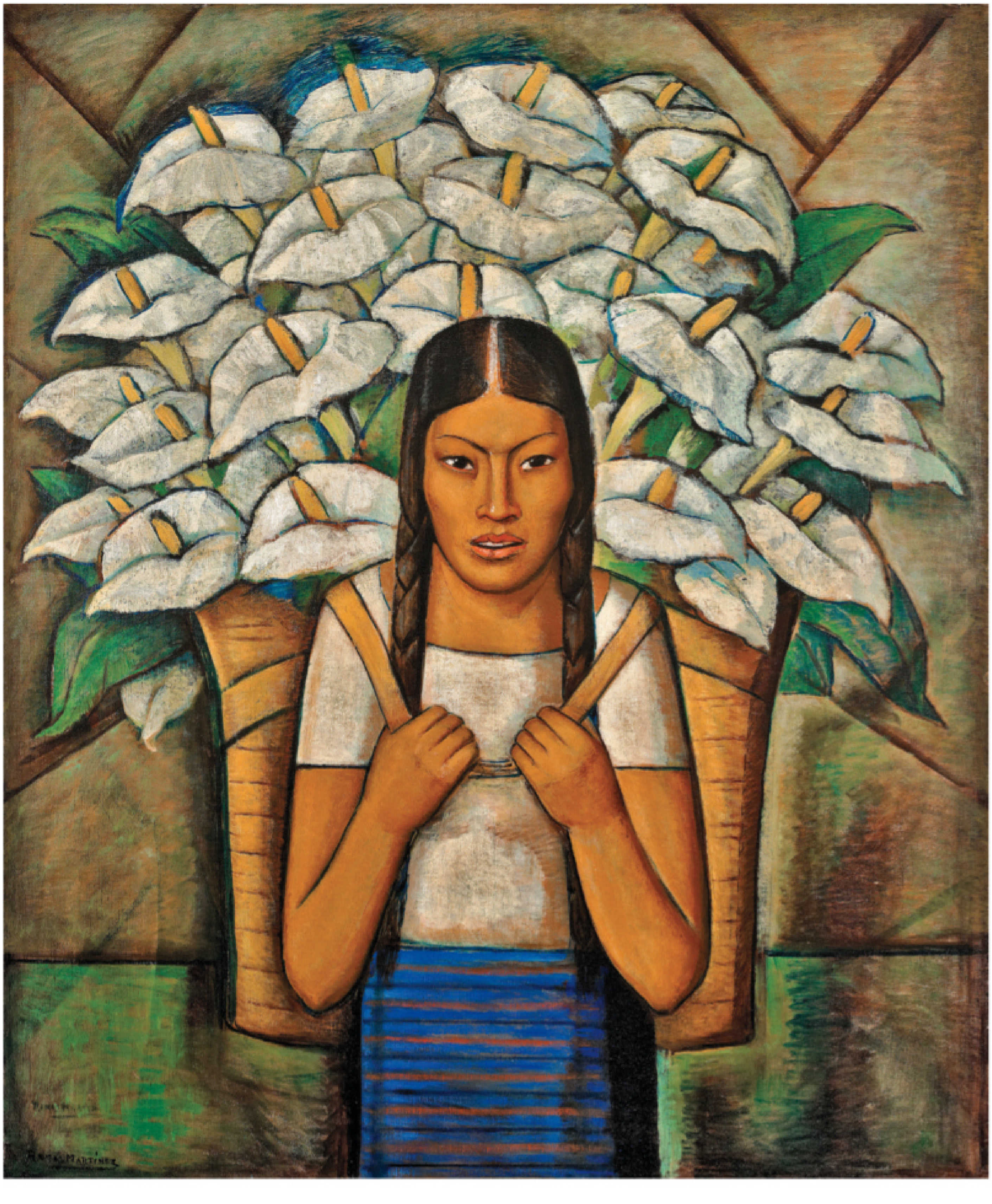

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Alfredo Ramos Martínez, *Calla Lily Vendor*, 1929. Oil on canvas. Private collection. © The Alfredo Ramos Martínez Research Project, reproduced by permission

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cross-country tour dedicated to music by the French composer Éliane Radigue, and last month he issued an illuminating retrospective anthology on the Saltern label. Here, he presents the première of "Orpheus Variations," a new Alvin Lucier piece for solo cello, seven woodwinds, and seven dancers. Lucier's "Glacier," for unaccompanied cello, completes the bill.—*S.S. (Feb. 21-22 at 8.)*

InsightALT Festival
Ailey Citigroup Theatre

American Lyric Theatre, which provides resources, mentorship, and funding for the composition of new operas, presents concert readings of three works in progress. Liliya Ugay's "The Opposable Thumb" begins with a military pilot crashing into a zoo after being shot out of the sky. Evan Meier's "Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Fallen Giant" drops Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective into the story of "Jack and the Beanstalk," and Theo Popov's "The Halloween Tree" adapts Ray Bradbury's novel about a group of trick-or-treating children on the adventure of their lives.—*O.Z. (Feb. 22 at 7 and Feb. 23 at 1 and 7.)*

MOVIES

Hail Satan?

The question mark in the title is the crucial idea of Penny Lane's documentary, which adopts a conventionally journalistic style to present political conflicts of the day. She films the activities of the Satanic Temple, an organization that started small and expanded nationwide, and which runs on an ironic premise: far from promoting Devil worship, the group is militantly nontheistic and works to maintain the separation of church and state—to oppose what one member, interviewed here, calls "Christian supremacy." (The figure of Satan serves, another says, as "a sociopolitical countermyth.") The Temple combats restrictions on abortion and resists the placement of monuments of the Ten Commandments on government property by asserting the right to place similarly massive statues of the goat deity Baphomet, which it commissions, alongside them. The group's members are masters of media who attract attention while filing lawsuits; they also suffer the growing pains of antiauthoritarians who work within the system and confront rebellion in their ranks.—*Richard Brody (Anthology Film Archives, Feb. 17, and streaming.)*

Hallelujah the Hills

In this antic, freewheeling comedy, from 1962, the director Adolfas Mekas tells a story of love, loss, and lunacy as filtered through movie madness. After two losers, Jack (Peter Beard) and Leo (Martin Greenbaum), spend seven years courting the same woman, Vera (each has his own version of her, played by a different actress), she runs off with a third man, and her jilted suitors head for the wilderness in raucous despair, to live out a survivalist fantasy that joins Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway to Charlie Chaplin, W. C. Fields, and D. W. Griffith. Jack and Leo see their romantic disasters (shown in flashbacks) as Hollywood melodramas, their rustic gunplay as war movies, their erotic dreams as musical numbers. Beard and Greenbaum are the world's loudest silent comics—Beard, a sort of East Village Buster Keaton, does dangerous stunts with a self-mocking hullabaloo—and Mekas puts them through shambling but surprisingly snap-timed routines that teem with cartoonish, bittersweet whimsy. These cinematic idiots savants come off as self-aware worshippers of clichés that everyone else in their eccentric orbit lives out blindly.—*R.B. (Anthology Film Archives, Feb. 21, and streaming.)*

I Was at Home, But

The emotional repression and intellectual stiffness that suffuse Angela Schanelec's melancholy new drama are as much a matter of style as of substance. Set mainly in a frictionless workaday Berlin, the film is centered on Astrid (Maren Eggert), a fortyish widow and the mother to a troubled teen-age boy named Phillip (Jakob Lassalle), who ran away from home and is in danger of being kicked out of school, and a girl of about eight, Flo (Clara Möller). Astrid's activities revolve around her home life; her effort to buy a used bike becomes a minor crisis, as does a chance meeting with a filmmaker friend (Dane Komljen). These encounters are filmed in detached, tableau-like scenes—mainly long, static takes, filled with painterly light, which, rather than highlighting the power of infinitesimal gestures, render them, in isolation from society and inner life, even smaller. A classroom production of "Hamlet" and an outburst of domestic rage are equally blank, arbitrary, and undeveloped. In German.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

L'Innocente

Luchino Visconti's last film, from 1976—an adaptation of Gabriele D'Annunzio's 1892 novel—brings literary flair to the story of a marital disaster. A Roman aristocrat, Tullio Hermil (Giancarlo Giannini), vainly pursues the dark-eyed, willful temptress Teresa Raffo (Jennifer O'Neill) and complains about his romantic torments to the wife he neglects, Giuliana (Laura Antonelli). When, in turn, Giuliana seeks solace in the arms of a young writer (Marc Porel), Tullio comes home to her, his conjugal passion reignited—but the revelation of her pregnancy sets off a chain of seemingly inevitable agonies. Visconti treats the script's florid speeches as sensual

IN CONCERT

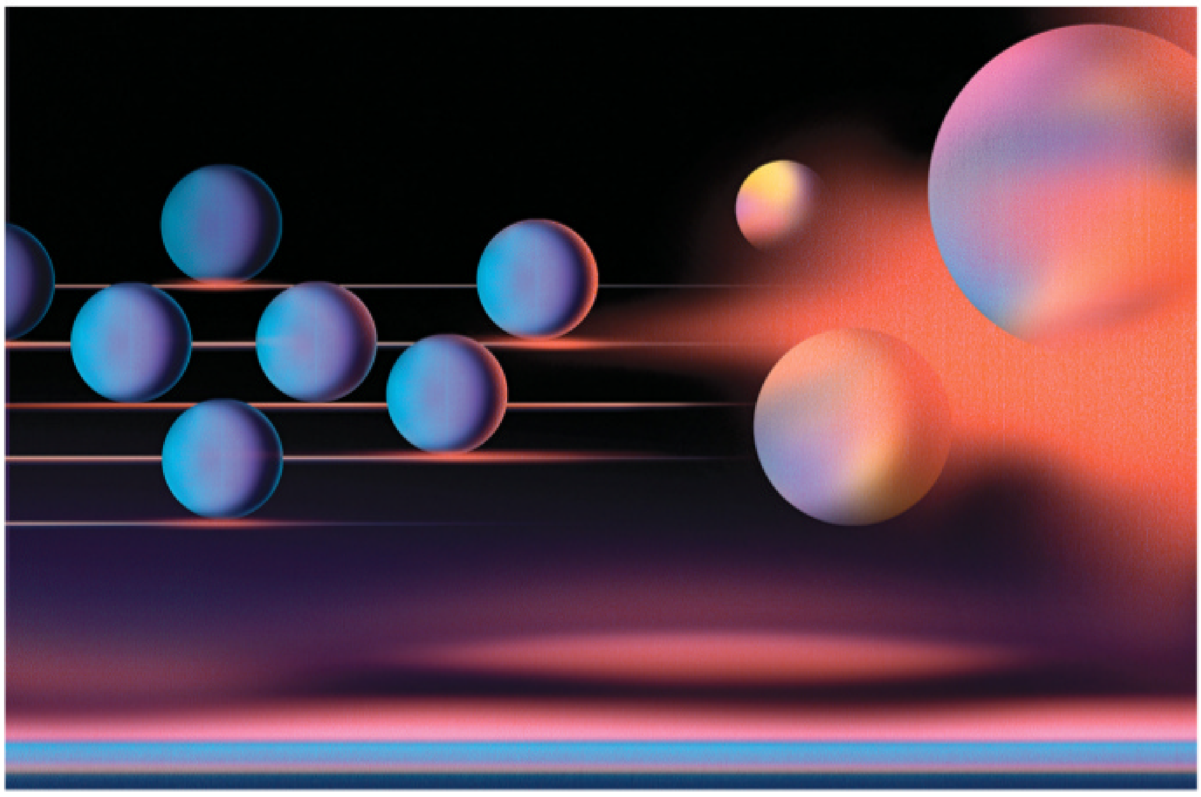
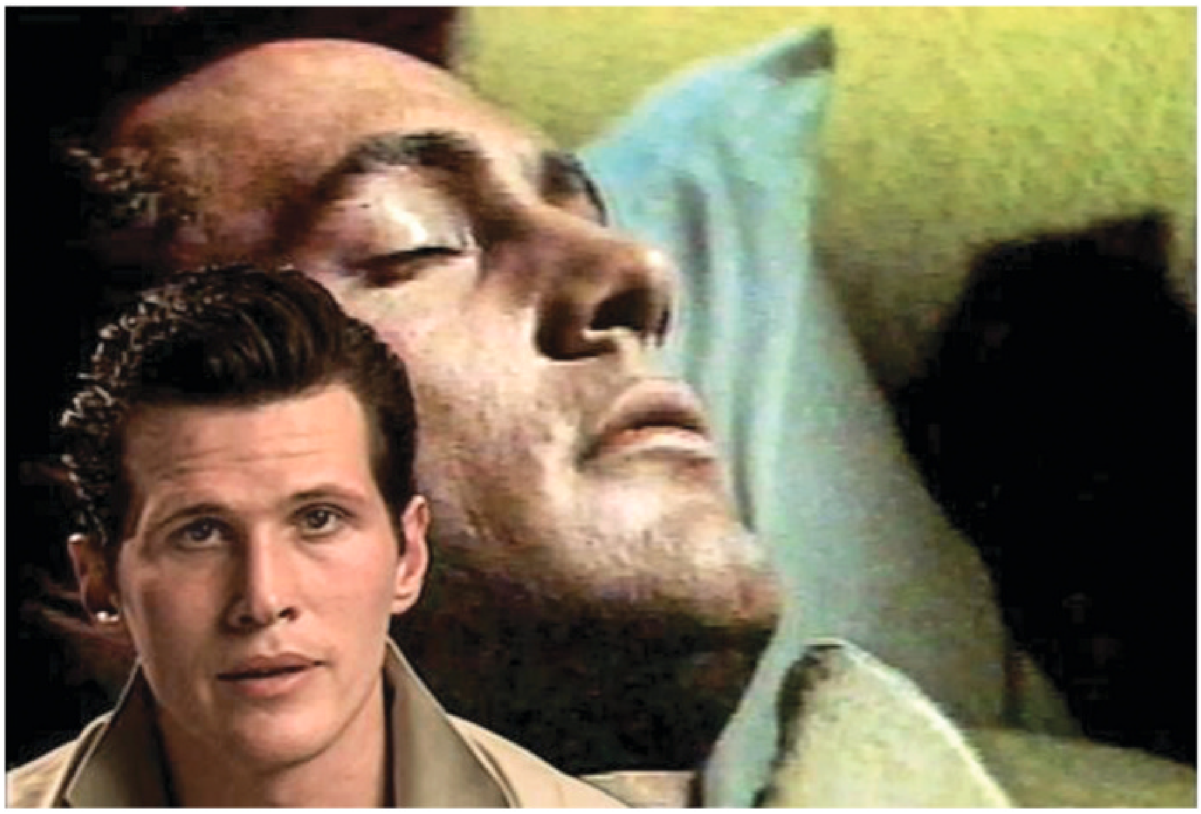


ILLUSTRATION BY MERLIN HOS

At the age of eighty-three, the composer Philip Glass shows no sign of slowing down; his calendar is chock-full of prominent bookings, including a festival in Philadelphia and European tour dates with Iggy Pop. Still, a shift could be under way if upcoming concerts by the Philip Glass Ensemble offer any indication. The group's engagement at Le Poisson Rouge is devoted to **"Music in Twelve Parts,"** the watershed compendium that Glass created between 1971 and 1974. Here, it's spread across four sets in two evenings, Feb. 16-17, and, for the first time ever, the band performs the piece without Glass's participation as a keyboardist. Elsewhere, new music by Glass is featured in the director JoAnne Akalaitis's adaptations of two works by the Cuban-American playwright María Irene Fornés, which get their New York première at Mabou Mines, running Feb. 21-March 7. **"Drowning,"** a five-page play, is transformed into a pocket opera; **"Mud"** is presented in a staged reading, with musical accompaniment.—*Steve Smith*

IN REVIVAL



COURTESY MARK RAPPAPORT

"Rock Hudson's Home Movies," one of the most original of all essay-films, screens Feb. 13 and Feb. 16, at Anthology Film Archives, in a retrospective of the director Mark Rappaport's work. (It's also streaming.) The film was made in 1992, seven years after Hudson died, of AIDS, and the ensuing public disclosure that he was gay. It's mainly composed of brief clips from a copious selection of Hudson's films—including melodramas by Douglas Sirk and comedies that co-star Doris Day and Tony Randall—which, as revealed by Rappaport's incisive analyses, display coded behavior ranging from subtle cruising to blatant homoeroticism, at a time when Hudson's sexual orientation was an open secret among his peers but carefully hidden from the public. Rappaport adds to these clips a fictional monologue, performed by the actor Eric Farr, who plays Hudson speaking posthumously about the ironies on which his conventionally manly screen persona was based, and the agonies of his double life. This touch of fiction turns the clips of Hudson's performances into virtual documentaries of his inner self, of Hollywood's winking mores, and of the repressive times.—*Richard Brody*

delights—translations into language of a vanished opulence that his images lovingly display. He films Giannini, Antonelli, and O'Neill with a rapt tenderness. He captures their glances in closeups of magnetic power, which are matched by the mellifluous, modulated voices that pour out grief in lofty and delicate phrases—and conceal, with the same rhetorical flourishes, deeply calculated machinations of an imperial cruelty. In Italian.—*R.B. (Film Forum.)*

Portrait of a Lady on Fire

An artist named Marianne (Noémie Merlant) journeys to a remote house in Brittany, where she has been hired to paint a portrait of Héloïse (Adèle Haenel), a young woman on the brink of marriage. To begin with, however, the subject refuses to pose; Marianne has to do the painting in secret, so that Héloïse won't know what she's up to. From these furtive beginnings, Céline Sciamma's new film, set in pre-Revolutionary France, fans out into a love story of startling openness and power—one zealously performed, edited with great concision, and concluding in a barrage of unforeseen and barely manageable emotion. With Valeria Golino as Héloïse's mother and Luàna Bajrami as Sophie, the family's loyal maid. Sophie has troubles of her own, which, far from being ignored by her social superiors, are assuaged, in a stirring show of female solidarity. In French.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 12/9/19.) (In limited release.)*

The Rules of the Game

The director Jean Renoir gives himself a star turn in this panoramic romance—made in 1939, on the eve of the Second World War—that's both a portrait of the artist and a vision of the times. He plays Octave, a failed musician whose high-society machinations result in a grand reception for France's heroic transatlantic pilot (Roland Toutain), who is in love with their hostess, a Viennese émigrée (Nora Gregor). She, in turn, is married to a French marquis (Marcel Dalio), who is cheating on her with a Parisian sophisticate (Mila Parély). Meanwhile, Octave flirts with a chambermaid (Paulette Dubost), sparking the violent rage of her gamekeeper husband (Gaston Modot). Life upstairs and downstairs in a majestic château gives Renoir a vast stage to fill with the themes and characters of the day, including a fatuous general who seems to embody the Maginot Line. Renoir's operetta-like confection is booby-trapped; stupefied revellers, fixing their gaze on a player piano, take their place among history's passive victims. In French.—*R.B. (Anthology Film Archives, Feb. 23, and streaming.)*

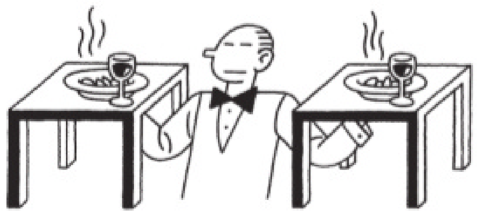
Seberg

Kristen Stewart, armed with short-cropped hair and spiky emotional responses, digs deep into the role of Jean Seberg. Benedict Andrews's movie takes us through just one of the many dismaying chapters in the actress's life. The story begins, appropriately, in 1968, in Paris, where Seberg lives with her husband, Romain Gary (Yvan Attal). On a flight to America, she meets an activist named Hakim Jamal (Anthony Mackie), and she not only embarks on an affair with him but starts devoting her energies, and her money, to radical causes. As a result, the F.B.I. agents Jack Solomon (Jack O'Connell) and Carl Kowalski (Vince Vaughn) are instructed to spy on Seberg, and thereafter to trash her reputation with leaks and lies. The consequences for her mental health are cruel and lasting. The film is at its strongest, unsurprisingly, when Stewart holds center stage; elsewhere, the focus of dramatic attention seems to wander.—*A.L. (12/16/19) (In limited release.)*

Vitalina Varela

Spectacular images, ideas, emotions, and performances are embedded in the lugubrious pace and tone of Pedro Costa's modernist fusion of classic melodrama and documentary. The protagonist—played by a nonprofessional actor who is also named Vitalina Varela—travels from her home in Cape Verde to Lisbon, to visit her terminally ill husband (whom she hasn't seen in decades), but arrives three days after his death. She moves into his dilapidated apartment and joins his community of immigrants who are struggling to survive in the face of racist hostility and official neglect. Most of the movie is virtually subterranean, with shanties and basements cast in permanent shadows. A grief-stricken priest (played by Ventura) provides the neighborhood's safety net, though his labors can't keep pace with his parishioners' ordeals. But the steadfast and determined Vitalina takes the lead in uniting the neighborhood; several glorious outdoor sequences of poignant farewells to the dead and new beginnings of hands-on local development have the visionary rapture of scenes by John Ford. In Cape Verdean Creole and Portuguese.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town



TABLES FOR TWO

Kochi

652 Tenth Ave.

The other night at Kochi, a new Korean restaurant in Hell's Kitchen, I decided to conduct an experiment. Dinner here is tasting-menu-only: nine courses, most of them skewers, from the chef Sungchul Shim, who worked at Per Se and Neta. At seventy-five dollars, it seemed, compared with similar offerings, to be unusually reasonably priced—half as much, for instance, as the skewer tasting menu at Torien, a new spinoff of a renowned Tokyo yakitori bar. And yet my server pushed, if gently, a handful of steeply priced supplements: osetra caviar, black truffles, uni, Wagyu beef. Were they necessary? Was this a hundred-and-fifty-dollar tasting menu posing as a seventy-five-dollar one? Was I in danger of being suckered by a marketing ploy? I'd find out, by declining them all on my first visit and then coming back and posing as a high roller.

I'm delighted to report my findings. The pine-nut-and-potato-milk soup completely swallowed up the caviar (an extra fifteen dollars)—not to mention the fact that, by the time a chef had painstakingly mounded the fish eggs in the tiny bowl (and applied, with tweezers, wisps of gold leaf and a minuscule flower, plucked from a minuscule stem), the otherwise fantastic soup, pleasingly warm on my initial visit, had gone cold.

The first time I had the slow-cooked chicken terrine, I was deeply impressed by the paper-thin slices of raw cremini mushroom that overlaid the meat. They were stirringly earthy, delicate, and sweet. I thought it would be a shame to overpower them with shaved black truffle (seventeen dollars), and, by my second visit, the restaurant seemed to have come to the same conclusion; the supplement was no longer on the menu.

I admit that Wagyu beef is obscenely rich, that the fat sort of crackles on your tongue before melting like butter. During my second meal at Kochi, it took the place of a rib-eye patty that had been served in pieces, kebab-like, on a skewer; the glistening, marbled slices of Wagyu (forty-three dollars) were, without question, more memorable. And yet the comparison seemed almost moot—because the most compelling part of the dish was, again, a relatively standard mushroom, this time a king trumpet. Carved into fantastically juicy, almost creamy segments, it held up beautifully to the char of the binchotan grill and to a swipe of pungent black-garlic-and-chestnut purée.

Throughout the meal, I found myself reëvaluating ingredients that I had come to consider prosaic. Mackerel, so often oily and bluntly fishy, was mellow and meaty, crowned with frizzled leeks and served atop sticky-sweet Japanese eggplant in a vinaigrette made with yuzu and makgeolli, a cloudy Korean rice wine. Yellowtail, that standby of the sushi bar, became newly rousing—cut into fat, sweet, pure-tasting squares, paired with a tart tiger's milk (a Peruvian-style citrus-based marinade), a dribble of gochujang, and a salad of tiny half-moons of crunchy cucumber and radish shredded as fine as confetti.

Would it be hyperbolic to say that the revelation that perilla (a Korean cousin of Japanese shiso) makes a sensational kimchi is more valuable to me than a hundred lobes of uni? Perhaps—but I'd be happy to eat uni once a year and perilla kimchi every morning with rice for breakfast. At Kochi, the kimchi was a garnish on a skewer of bo ssäm, for which pork belly was cooked for fourteen hours. That said, of all the supplements, the uni, offered with a bowl of bibimbap, made the most sense, turning the sticky mixture of soy-butter rice, candied anchovy, and spicy pollock roe into something supple and pudding-like.

If thirteen dollars are burning a hole in your pocket, I'd recommend that particular upcharge. The heart of Kochi's appeal, though, is Shim's ability not to simply deliver luxury but to coax it out of the ordinary. The menu is partly inspired by Korean royal-court cuisine, a multicourse style eaten by the ruling family during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), which was lavish yet nourishing and wholesome. Without the supplements, Kochi's menu feels opulent but also restrained, indulgence for the everyday. *(Tasting menu starts at $75.)*

—*Hannah Goldfield*

PHOTOGRAPH BY JANELLE JONES FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

THE NEW YORKER

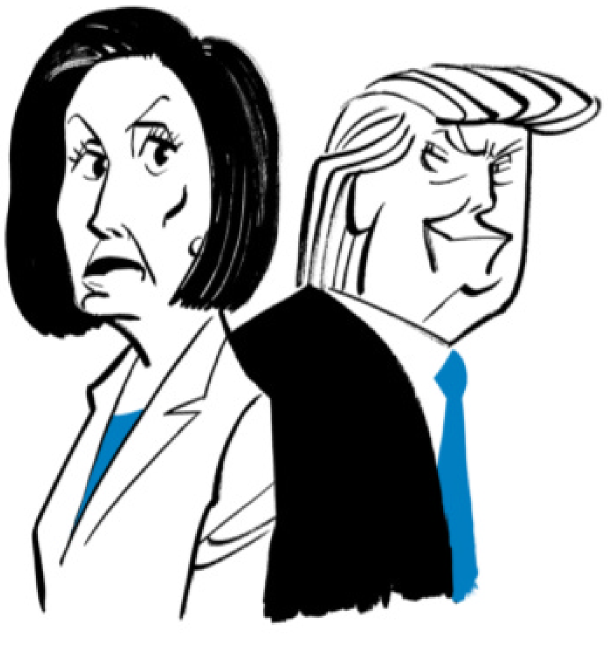
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
AFTER IMPEACHMENT

On January 23, 2017, Donald Trump’s fourth day as President, he met with congressional leaders in the State Dining Room of the White House. “You know, I won the popular vote,” he started off, and then repeated the calumny that Hillary Clinton had received three to five million illegal votes, owing to fraud. “That’s not true,” Nancy Pelosi replied, according to “A Very Stable Genius,” the recently published account of the Trump Presidency by the Washington *Post* reporters Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig. “If we’re going to work together,” Pelosi said, “we have to stipulate to a certain set of facts.” Steve Bannon, then Trump’s chief strategist, who was in the room, whispered to colleagues, “She’s going to get us. Total assassin.”

Pelosi did become one of Trump’s most unflinching adversaries, in part because she grasped early on that invitations to his White House are often just call sheets for unscripted television; her finger-jabbing readiness to get in Trump’s face has made her a recurring meme of the Democratic resistance. She offered her most vivid performance yet on February 4th, during the President’s third State of the Union address. As Trump spoke, Pelosi, wearing suffragist white, sat behind him in the high-backed chair reserved for the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and conspicuously shuffled and reshuffled a printed copy of the President’s speech. After he finished, she tore the text in half. Twitter blew up, as the Speaker had clearly intended; she explained that she had abandoned decorum because Trump’s speech “was a manifesto of mistruths.”

Hashtag wars are the President’s terrain, however; the conflict between Pelosi and Trump matters most for what it says about the questionable health of the Constitution’s system of checks and balances. After the 2018 midterm elections, when Democrats regained control of the House but not the Senate, Pelosi, who will turn eighty in March, was elected House Speaker, overcoming opposition from progressive and younger representatives by promising to relinquish her post by 2022. Last year, as the Mueller investigation wound down, Pelosi resisted calls from many Democrats to launch an impeachment inquiry. She argued that the idea lacked public support, even as the Mueller report turned out to be damning, particularly in its litany of examples of likely obstruction of justice. Pelosi’s judgment seemed to be grounded in political realism: even if the President were impeached, the chances remained slim to vanishing that the Republican-controlled Senate—cowed by Trump’s base and by allied demagogues on the airwaves—would convict and remove him from office by the necessary two-thirds vote. Why impeach Trump if he could describe an acquittal as vindication, using it to denounce his enemies and to rally his following?



Last September, after the Ukraine matter broke, Pelosi concluded—at the urging of both progressives and centrists in her House caucus—that this time the evidence was different. Trump’s abuse of U.S. military aid and economic power to coerce Ukraine to investigate Joe Biden, she said, had crossed a line from “bad behavior” to presenting “a challenge to our Constitution.” The House hearings that followed, despite a hurried schedule and White House obstruction, created a convincing record of Trump’s blithe disregard of a President’s duty to place the national interest before his own. For all its political risks, Pelosi told the *Times* early this month, the impeachment investigation succeeded, because it “pulled back a veil of behavior totally unacceptable to our founders. . . . The public will see this with a clearer eye, an unblurred eye.” She implied that such clarity would shape the judgment of voters in November, but she also seemed to acknowledge uncertainty about the coming election: “Whatever happens, he has been impeached forever.”

When the Senate exonerated Trump,

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

last week, following his brief and witness-free impeachment trial, the most striking reminder of the constitutional issues at stake was provided by Mitt Romney, the Republican Presidential nominee in 2012, as he joined a united Democratic caucus to vote for Trump's conviction on the article charging abuse of power. In eloquent remarks, he described the President's conduct as "a flagrant assault on our electoral rights, our national security, and our fundamental values." He went on, "Corrupting an election to keep oneself in office is perhaps the most abusive and destructive violation of one's oath of office that I can imagine."

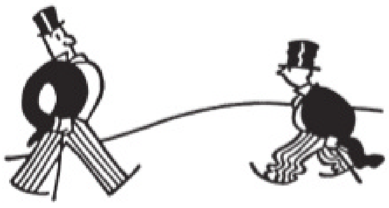
Whether Trump will nonetheless become the first President in U.S. history to be impeached and then reëlected remains a matter of mortal dread among many Democrats. For a President presiding over a growing economy and low unemployment, Trump's disapproval ratings remain high, but incumbents with not much better numbers have gone on to win a second term. His followers still camp out overnight to gain admission to his rallies. Given the widespread animus toward the President in big blue states like California and New York, it seems doubtful that he can win the popular vote in November, yet recent state polls show that he has a plausible path to an Electoral College victory, similar to the one he constructed in 2016. Democratic voters seem motivated to defeat Trump above all other goals, yet they must first navigate a Presidential nominating contest in which there is no decisive front-runner and plenty of potential for divisiveness.

In "A Very Stable Genius," Rucker and Leonnig provide an arresting narrative of how Trump has come to operate with far fewer constraints and much greater conviction about the soundness of his own instincts. The President's ignorance can be staggering. (On a tour of the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial, he made clear to his chief of staff at the time, John Kelly, that he did not know what had happened at Pearl Harbor.) But the book's most frightening scenes document Trump's indifference to the rule of law, compounded, in some cases, by his reliance on right-wing television personalities for ideas. In 2018, he grew deeply frustrated with then Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, because she ignored border-security proposals floated by the Fox Business host Lou Dobbs; she had concluded that the proposals were infeasible or illegal. When Trump insisted that Nielsen act as he wanted, she told him, "Federal law enforcement doesn't work like that. . . . These people have taken an oath to uphold the law. Do you really want to tell them to do the opposite?" According to Rucker and Leonnig, Trump answered, "Then we'll pardon them." By now, any dispassionate reading of the Mueller report, the impeachment investigation, and the accumulating record of journalism can lead to but one conclusion: we have been warned.

—*Steve Coll*

OXFORD POSTCARD

BERNIE'S BRO

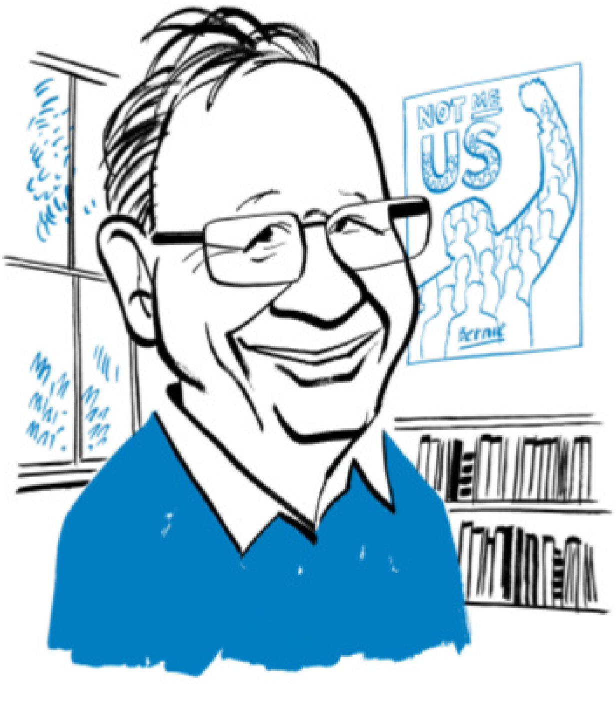


Next month, American expatriates all over the world will vote in the Democrats Abroad primary, which awards delegates to the Democratic National Convention. In 2016, Bernie Sanders won the expat vote handily, snapping up nine delegates to Hillary Clinton's four. At that year's convention, in Philadelphia, the last delegate to cast his vote for Bernie was also the candidate's brother, Larry Sanders, who has lived in England for the past five decades. He travelled back home to pledge his support. "It is with enormous pride that I cast my vote for Bernie Sanders," Larry announced, choking up, and using the nickname for his little brother, whom he usually calls Bernard.

"In the back of my mind, I knew it was such a long shot," Larry said, last week, of his brother's prospects in 2016. "His whole weakness amongst people of color was obvious. He hoped to shift it, but it was going to be very difficult." Larry was sitting in his kitchen, in Oxford, wearing a navy cardigan, gray slacks, and socks under his sandals. He is six years older than Bernie. (The two look similar and sound almost the same, but Larry's hair is gray.) Larry is also a socialist politician; for eight years, until he retired, in 2013, he represented East Oxford as a county councillor for the Green Party, which, in 2016, appointed him its health spokesperson.

Larry lives on a quiet side street by the Kidneys, a nature reserve about a mile from Oxford's city center. Apple and quince trees grow in his back yard, dropping fruit at the foot of a slide that he installed for his grandchildren. Larry was headed to London the next day, to host an event on behalf of his brother's campaign. "The situation is much different now," he said. "His odds of winning are so much better." He had printed out several articles to review, including an op-ed from the Boston *Globe* praising the "realism" of Bernie's climate plan. The house was strewn with campaign paraphernalia: a "Join-the-Action" figure, a sticker depicting Bernie as a character from "Sesame Street," and a poster bearing his slogan, "Not Me. Us." In the living room were flyers for next month's Democrats Abroad primary. (Americans can participate if they abstain from sending in state absentee ballots.) "I had no idea this existed until four years ago," Larry said. Before 2016, he hadn't voted since leaving the United States, in the sixties, when he followed his first wife abroad.

The Sanders brothers grew up in Brooklyn in the forties and fifties, playing stickball and attending Dodgers



Larry Sanders

games when they could afford it. (A bleacher seat cost sixty cents.) When Bernie was in high school, he ran for student-body president on a platform that promised to raise scholarship funds for orphans of the Korean War. "He finished third, out of three," Larry said. But his policy was adopted by the school.

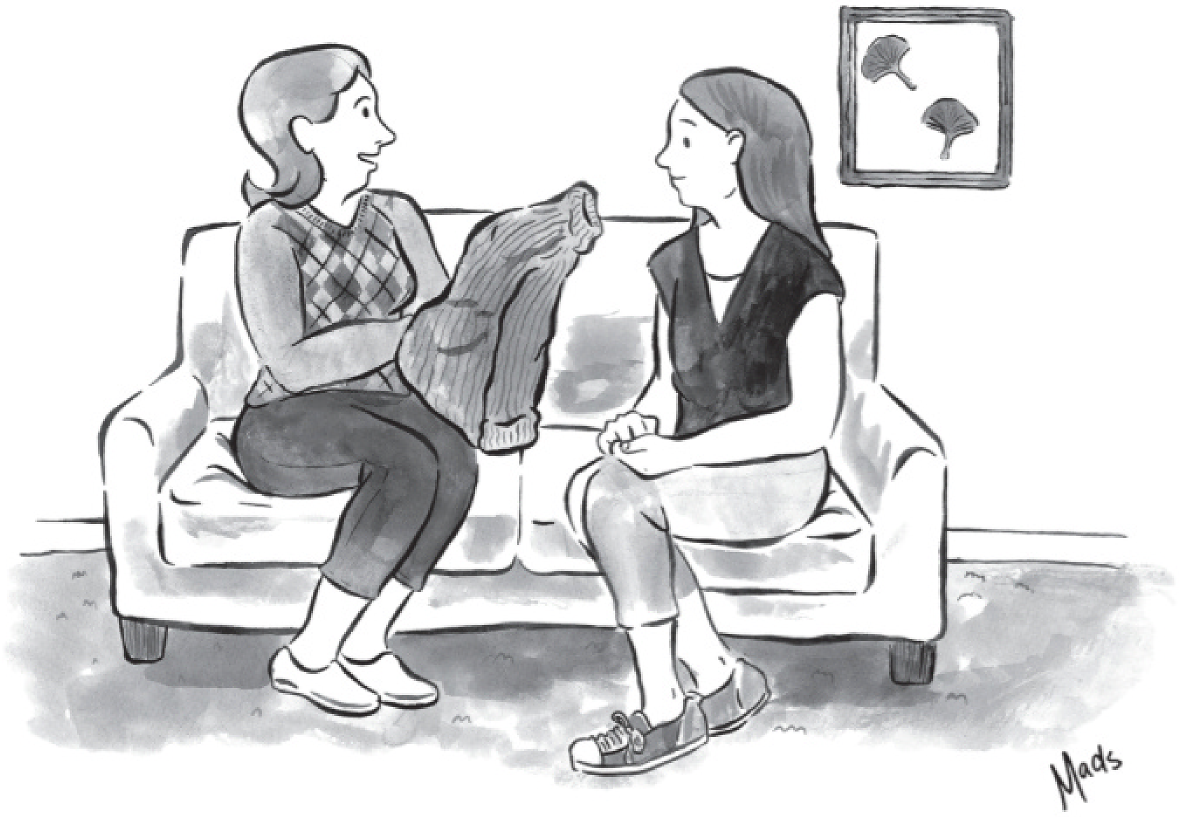
Larry describes his brother as a bit of a workaholic. The last time Bernie visited England was a couple of years ago, to promote a book. He wasn't interested in touring Oxford's historic sites. When Larry took him to Blenheim Palace, Bernie remarked on the plight of the workers who had built it. "The buildings, they didn't impress him," Larry said. "He was impressed by the number of people who must have slogged their guts out digging the pool." Bernie's only wish was to see the track on Iffley Road where, in 1954, Roger Bannister ran the first four-minute mile. "Bernard was amazed by that," Larry said, adding that his brother was a star on the James Madison High School track-and-field team. "Four-thirty-seven," Larry said, citing Bernie's mile time.

As a child, Bernie was known for blurting out, at school, details about the family "that we would prefer not to be public," Larry said. "He had the idea that you really had to tell the truth. I had to have a long talk with him—it's right not to lie, but you do not have to tell the truth all the time." This honesty, Larry suggested, has both fortified his brother's support and stoked his opposition: "He lost elections. He didn't give up. He took abuse." Of Trump, Larry added, "Bernard will bash him."

The brothers are still close. They used to speak on the phone every two weeks, but the rigors of the campaign have reduced their communication mainly to e-mails. In a recent message to Bernie, Larry mentioned an upcoming campaign event in France. "I told him that, because of him, I had to go to Paris," Larry said. " 'See how much I do!' "

The next evening, in London, Larry's Bernie event was sold out. A hundred people gathered in the basement of a trade-union headquarters. Some wore T-shirts with the slogan "Our Revolution Abroad." The results from the Iowa caucuses were supposed to have been reported that morning, but technical problems had delayed the announcement. Larry chalked it up to "cock-up, rather than conspiracy." In a gentle voice, he reminded the audience members of their voting power. "We are like a small state," he said of the Democrats Abroad primary, which, in 2016, elected one delegate fewer than Wyoming. Of the D.N.C. Convention, he said, "I think things will happen on the floor—good things and bad things—but it is going to be nip and tuck." He plans to attend again this year. "Bernard is not a big crier," he said. "But I am."

—Eren Orbey



"Now that you are a woman, I want you to have this sweater that was given to me by my mom, who was always cold. It was given to her by her mom, who was always cold. She got it from her mom, who never knew warmth in her life."

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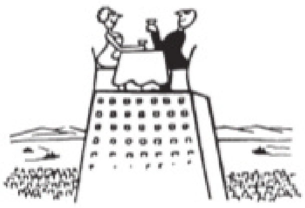
MINIBAR REPORT
TRANSFORMATIVE TWENTIES



Is there room for champagne and chocolate when the planet is burning? One recent Tuesday, fifty hospitality and marketing professionals gathered in a suite at the Greenwich Hotel to hear the findings of a report put together by the London-based boutique-hotel booking service Mr & Mrs Smith and a consulting firm called the Future Laboratory. The subject: the future of romantic travel.

"No one needs another report that's about the next hotel that might be on the moon or Mars," James Lohan said. He had been a night-club promoter before he founded Mr & Mrs Smith, in 2003, with his wife, Tamara, who used to run a matchmaking service.

"Or robots," Tamara added. She wore a dress with a swirly black-and-white print.

The name of Mr & Mrs Smith, which began as a hotel guidebook, is a reference to a time when unmarried couples had to sign hotel registers with an alias. "We're celebrating the great British dirty weekend," James said. "A celebration of going away with someone you love—in wedlock, out of wedlock! We're not worried about who you are, what you are."

"In the first book, one of our reviewers went away as part of a throuple," Tamara said.

"Too many guides are a bit worthy or a bit too worried," James said. He wore silver boots and a blue velvet blazer.

As guests sat in front of a big screen,

the Lohans summarized the changes in the boutique-hotel sphere over the past two decades. Décor: less froufrou. Bedding: less itchy. Bathrooms: "No more drying soaps in small dispensers," James said. Instead, "Aesop and Malin & Goats, or Goetz, or however you say it." In the unexpected-guest category: "Airbnb obviously turned up," he said, "which was a shock to all of us, that you could charge people money to sleep on your floor."

He introduced Chris Sanderson, of the Future Laboratory, which interviewed experts in travel and related fields (marijuana, sex) to come up with its findings, summarized in a forty-seven-page report. In a teal blazer and a blue pocket square, Sanderson advanced a new term for the nascent decade—"the Transformative Twenties." He rattled off potential trends, such as the Enlarge Your Paris Project ("You have to be careful how you say that," he joked), which seeks to connect travellers to lesser-known locales. He predicted a lot of connecting. "Flexecutives" may connect over "peakends"—Thursday-to-Monday holidays bookended by telecommuting. Guests can expect hotels to connect them with opportunities to volunteer, to ingest CBD, or to participate in threesomes.

"Maybe we say goodbye to the candlelit dinner and hello to biometrically responsive room lighting," Sanderson said. "Increasingly, the aphrodisiac won't be in the oyster, it's maybe in the way the oyster's been collected." There were slides touting a new travel vocabulary: "nuptial nomadism," "polycule peregrinations," "self-romance," and "buddymoons, where we celebrate love between same-sex relationships, but not as you imagine them, because this is about straight mates with their gay friends," Sanderson said. "Or what about a 'brotopian break'?"

The discussion adjourned for drinks. "Some of it is obvious," Rebecca Soloff, from Six Senses hotels, said. "People want nontoxic, they want organic, they want local, they want raw materials." She went on, "But sexual wellness becoming a thirty-two-billion-dollar industry?"—a statistic from the presentation—"that's not something I was expecting."

Experts who contributed to the report took questions. "Do you see this whole theory as a global mind-set?" a woman asked. "Or are Americans more open to talking about sex and cannabis and all these other wonderful things?"

"I see a lot of customers from all over the world who might be coming from a more conservative environment," Eva Goicochea, the founder of Maude, a line of sex products, said.

"Age range?" another woman asked.

"Statistically speaking, people over thirty-five are having way more sex than people under thirty-five, which is great," Goicochea said. "We've sort of said that sex is for everyone, like food is for everybody."

"One of the fastest-growing demographics of cannabis consumers is fifty-five and up," Verena von Pfetten, a founder of the cannabis-media company Gossamer, said. "It's not about getting fucked up. It can be to eat Chinese food and watch Netflix," she added, "but maybe it's also a turndown service with a sleep tincture, or a massage with CBD oil."

Near a table displaying bottles of Maude lubricant, Peter Barsoom, the C.E.O. of the edibles company 1906, described his wares. "We have a product for sleep, and we have a product for sex," he said. "Imagine, in your minibar, you had a 'Love' chocolate and a 'Midnight' chocolate. Those are the two things we want when we're in a hotel room: either sex or a good night's sleep."

—*Sheila Marikar*

BY HOOK OR BY CROOK
WOOLLY

"I'm starting with the base, which is a tree," the street artist London Kaye said. "Once I get that up, I'll add all the adorable koalas and goodness and things. I'm excited!" It was a face-numbingly cold early morning on a corner of Wooster and Spring Streets, and the wind cut like a knife, but Kaye, whose medium is crochet, appeared upbeat. With a white cap pulled low over her long blond hair, and wearing a pair of fingerless gloves, she secured a brown swath of crocheted yarn she had made earlier to a chain-link fence across from the SoHo Chanel store. Kaye, who is thirty-one and based in Los Angeles, was in town to install the large-scale sets—multicolor crochet creations attached to a wire-fence backdrop—that she'd made for "Beyond Babel," a dance performance inspired by "Romeo and Juliet," which is being put up at Judson Church, off Washington Square. On the plane from L.A., she had lugged an army duffel full of crocheted hearts with her, to hand out to the audience members. "It takes me a minute and a half to make a heart," she said.

While in town, Kaye decided to undertake another project: a ten-foot-by-eight-foot yarn installation of outback animals encircling a sapling, to raise awareness of the Australian wildfires. "I like making things that have to do with current events, but that also make people happy," she said, cocking her head to consider the placement of a wool branch she had just tied to the fence. Rummaging in her bag, she unfurled a life-size rust-colored yarn kangaroo. "Look, he's got a little joey, too!" she said.

Kaye studied classical ballet as a child and learned to crochet as a teen. "When I was in ninth grade, I hurt my back badly, dancing, and that's when it took off," she said, attaching a supine gray koala to the fence, then thrusting her hands into her pockets to warm them. "I loved crochet. I'd sell scarves to my friends. I was always the weird girl who would bring yarn to parties." She went to N.Y.U. on a dance scholarship, and when she graduated she began working at the Apple Store in the meatpacking district. One day, in 2013, the fibre artist Agata Oleksiak, known as Olek—who has yarn-bombed monuments such as the Wall Street bull and the Astor Place Cube—came in to buy a computer. "I thought she looked so cool," Kaye said. "She had this crazy crochet bag." After Olek left the store, Kaye reprinted the receipt so she could Google her name later. "That's what led me to yarn-bombing," she said. Realizing that her hobby could find a larger canvas, she took a scarf that she'd made—"shocking pink and lime green and fuzzy"—and wrapped it around a tree outside her Bed-Stuy apartment.

She kept going, pursuing projects that mixed a dash of twee with a heap of ambition: a thousand yarn hearts tied around Union Square on Valentine's Day; a giant crocheted Jonas Brother tacked up in Williamsburg during Winter Storm Jonas; an enormous woollen green-pepper pizza slice outside an East Village pizza joint. To every installation, she affixed a card with her Instagram handle.

Soon, companies began approaching her: Kaye has yarn-bombed a school bus for a Gap ad; a Brooklyn Starbucks; fourteen REDValentino store windows; and a Miller Lite billboard in Times Square. The branded projects allowed her to leave her job at the Apple Store and have given her the freedom to pursue her street art. Even though her creations often get taken down quickly, either by passersby or by property owners, she persists. A few years ago, on the side of a Bushwick building, Kaye installed three enormous crocheted figures—the twins from "The Shining" holding hands with the boy protagonist from Wes Anderson's "Moonrise Kingdom"—and earned the ire of local activists, who saw the work as a sign of the neighborhood's creeping gentrification. "It was the wrong piece on the wrong building," Kaye said. She stood on tippy-toe on a collapsible stool. "These three huge white children. It's a painful memory, but it was a lesson." She tugged the top of a koala's ears over the fence's jagged edge. "You can stretch and manipulate the yarn in such organic ways," she said.

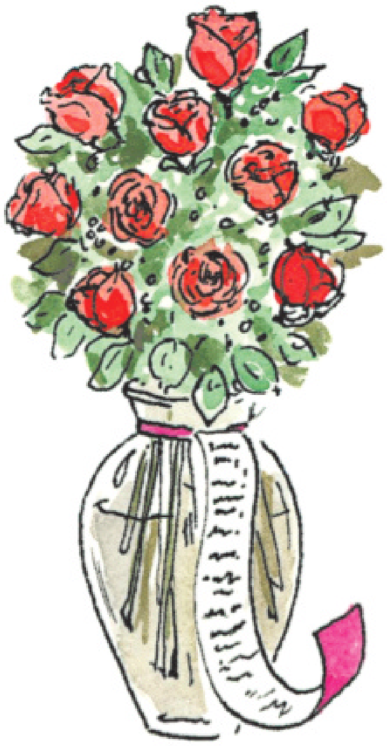
A bespectacled woman in a purple felt hat approached the fence, her eyes watery from the cold. "Oh, this is adorable," she said, taking in the woodland scene. "I tried to learn to crochet recently, because I wanted to make stuff for my baby granddaughter, but I was so bad at it." She laughed. "The friend who taught me was very patient, but somehow . . . my fingers . . . " The woman looked down at her hands.

"Once you learn, it becomes so relaxing and meditative," Kaye said encouragingly. She turned to the fence, her own fingers flying nimbly, fastening a wool leaf atop a wool branch. "Crochet is very forgiving."

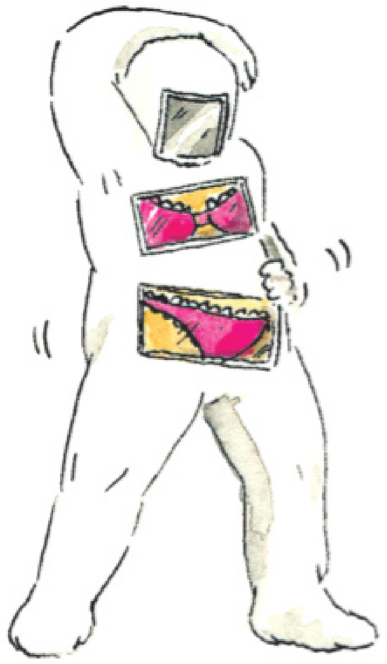
—*Naomi Fry*

SKETCHPAD BY EMILY FLAKE

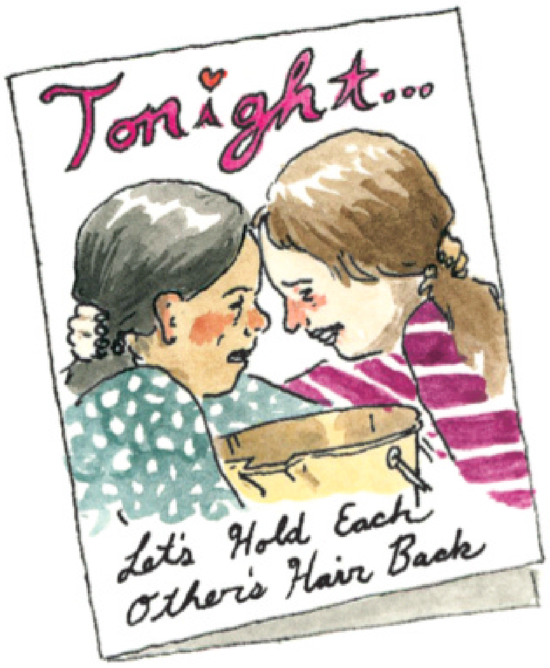
VALENTINE'S DAY GIFTS FOR FLU SEASON

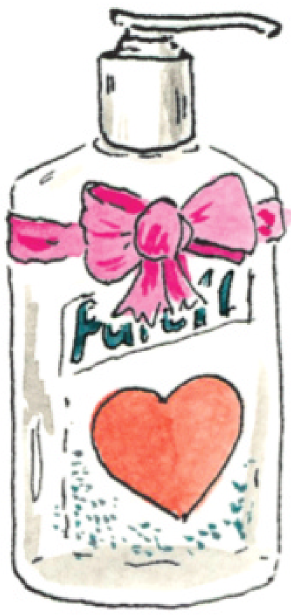


A dozen roses accompanied by a written description of their scent, because, God knows, you haven't been able to smell for days.

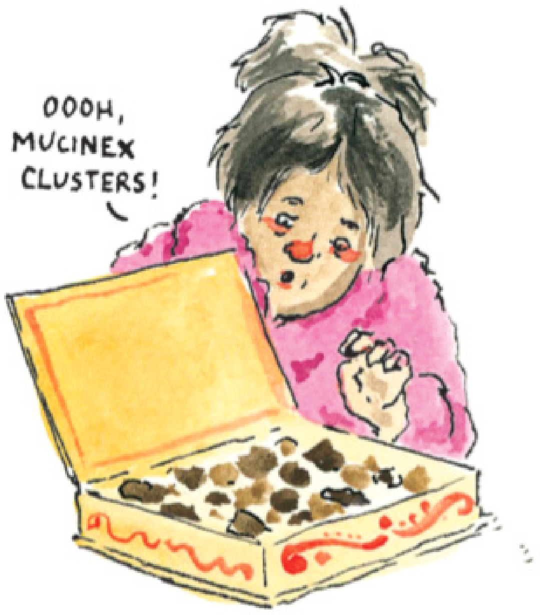


Hazmat suit with cutouts to show off lingerie.

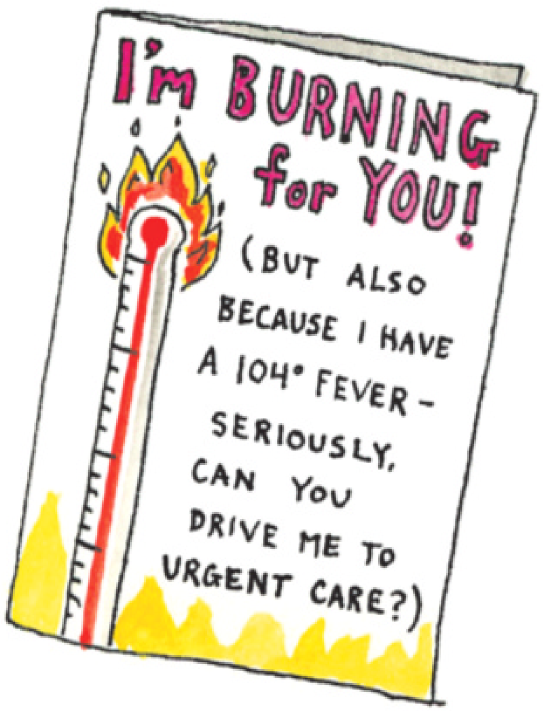

Tonight...
Let's Hold Each Other's Hair Back



Bottle of the champagne of hand sanitizers.


OOOH, MUCINEX CLUSTERS!

Chocolate-covered antihistamine sampler.


I'm BURNING for YOU!
(BUT ALSO BECAUSE I HAVE A 104° FEVER – SERIOUSLY, CAN YOU DRIVE ME TO URGENT CARE?)

ANNALS OF NATURE

BETTING THE FARM

The obsessions of Jake Fiennes could change how Britain uses its land.

BY SAM KNIGHT

One day last summer, Jake Fiennes was lost in a cloud of butterflies. He was on a woodland path near Holkham Beach, on the north coast of Norfolk. Every decade or so, ten million painted-lady butterflies, which are orange, black, and white, migrate to Britain from tropical Africa. The hot summer meant that it was a bumper year for native species, too, and the painted ladies mingled with red admirals, peacocks, and common blues, feeding on bushes set back a few yards from the path. "Just sat in a haze of flittering, fluttering butterflies," Fiennes told me later. "I was in awe. These flowers were just exploding."

Two friends of mine happened to be passing at that moment. They saw a figure in the swirl. Fiennes, who is forty-nine, has bright-blue eyes and a shaved head, except for an irregular flap of white hair, which is jagged with gray. He is an arresting presence, with an abrupt, avid way of speaking. He combines the correct jargon of the English countryside—hedges are flailed, ditches are grubbed, the grass is the sward—with a lot of swearing. He starts sentences in the middle. He began to talk to my friends, at them, about the painted ladies, about how they floated on gusts from the Atlas Mountains; how if you looked closely enough you could see the faded wings of the older creatures; and how they got tired flying over the sea, and sometimes rested, like a settling of dusty stars, on fishing boats in the English Channel. My friends stood and gawped for a while. Then they carried on, leaving the butterfly man behind.

"How do we feed the nine billion?" Fiennes said. "Through functioning ecosystems."

Fiennes is the conservation manager of the Holkham Estate, one of Britain's most important private landholdings. The estate covers about twenty-five thousand acres and includes a nature reserve, which is visited by almost a million people a year, and a farming business that grows potatoes, sugar beets, and barley, for beer. In 2018, Fiennes was hired by Holkham's principal landowner, the eighth Earl of Leicester, to bolster wildlife across the estate, from its intensively farmed arable land to its wetland bird habitats. Fiennes describes what he does as "multifunctional farming" or "environmental farming." He believes that farmers in the twenty-first century must cultivate as much as they can on their land—fungi for the soil, grasses for the pollinators, weeds for the insects, insects for the birds, pasture for the livestock—for the long-term goals of carbon capture and food production. "How do we feed the nine billion?" Fiennes said. "We feed them through functioning ecosystems."

Fiennes has spent his adult life in British farming, but he is not quite of it. He is the twin brother of the actor Joseph Fiennes, and one of six siblings in one of Britain's best-known bohemian families—the Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes, who choose to simplify their surname. (Jake's eldest brother is Ralph; his sisters, Sophie and Martha, are filmmakers; his third brother, Magnus, is a music producer, based in Los Angeles; Ranulph Fiennes, the polar explorer, is a cousin.) Fiennes is profoundly dyslexic and almost entirely self-taught. Last year, he was an adviser to Britain's first major review of its national parks since 1947, which was chaired by Julian Glover, a journalist and a former speechwriter for David Cameron. "There's an element of Jake which looks like he could have taken up farming or heroin," Glover told me. "There's no one else quite like him."

Fiennes lives in an old blacksmith's house with his partner, Barbara Linsley, an agricultural historian, in the village of Burnham Thorpe, a few miles from

PHOTOGRAPH BY SIÂN DAVEY

Holkham. On the wall above his stairs are the heads and antlers of Britain's six deer species, which Fiennes has shot and eaten. On a beautiful afternoon last September, Fiennes drove me from his house to the grounds of Holkham Hall, which was built by the Coke family, who were ennobled as the Earls of Leicester by King George II, in 1744. (The name is pronounced "Cook.") Fiennes turned his Ford Ranger to face the gates and the arrow-straight drive leading into the park, and rolled a black cigarette. "This is the front door of Holkham," he said. "This is Coke of Norfolk saying, 'This is how big my cock is.'"

Holkham was one of the birthplaces of the agricultural revolution. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the estate, which included some seventy farms, set new standards for food production, instituting regular four-course crop rotations, long-term leases, systematic breeding programs, and the use of cover crops, such as clover, which fix nitrogen in the soil. Though many of these techniques originated earlier, they were publicized to great effect by Thomas William Coke, a prominent politician. Coke of Norfolk, as he was known, staged annual sheep shearings that drew hundreds of landowners to the estate. In July, 1820, Prince Potemkin of Russia, along with visitors from Baltimore and Paris, learned about Arabian sheep, tricks to stop mice from eating cornstalks, and the correct direction for drilling seeds (north to south). The "Norfolk rotation" was replicated across Britain's lowland farms and increased food production, liberating workers from the land to take their chances in the mines and factories of the industrial revolution.

When Coke died, in 1842, a stone column with a wheat sheaf on top was erected at Holkham. Fiennes drove his truck across the grass to show it to me. The pedestal is decorated with sculptures of sheep, seed drills, and sayings apposite for our frightening ecological age. "What I love is this," Fiennes said, pointing at an inscription below a plow. It read "Live and Let Live."

Fiennes told me to close my eyes. The monument stands in a corner of Jane Austen-style parkland, a dreamlike England. "What can you hear?" Fiennes asked. I was struck by the silence. After a moment, I could make out the small sound of a couple of birds, singing in the distance. "Generally, not a lot," he said. During Fiennes's lifetime, Britain has lost about forty-four million breeding birds. "This has become a natural, day-to-day thing that is not there," Fiennes said. "This is what it is."

The United Kingdom is a farmed country. Almost seventy-five per cent of the land is given over to agriculture—compared with some forty-five per cent in the United States. After the privations of the Second World War, the country joined a continent-wide push to banish hunger from Europe. Between 1935 and 1998, aided by chemicals, subsidies, heavy machinery, and crop science, British farmers more or less tripled their per-acre yields of wheat, oats, and barley. Milk production doubled. The amount of chicken meat offered for sale increased by a factor of twenty-five. Traditional farming methods, such as the Norfolk rotation, fell away.

Many seminatural habitats were drained or plowed under. An estimated ninety-seven per cent of hay meadows were lost. Between 1990 and 2010, the area of crops treated with pesticides in the U.K. increased by fifty per cent. The environmental damage caused by Britain's intensive agriculture has only recently been properly understood. In 2013, twenty-five nature organizations published the first "State of Nature" report. "Even the most casual of observers may have noticed that all is not well," Sir David Attenborough wrote in the foreword.

Researchers studied more than three thousand species and found that sixty per cent were in decline. Modern farming has been a nightmare for the familiar creatures—mole, rat, toad, and badger—of the British landscape. The 2019 "State of Nature" report concluded, "Farmland birds have declined more severely than birds in any other habitat." More than half have disappeared in the past fifty years. We have one turtledove where we used to have ten. Sixty-eight per cent of starlings have gone, along with a quarter of our moths. In 2014, scientists found that lots in the city of Leicester contained a third more organic carbon—a standard measure of soil fertility—than the surrounding farmland.

As we drove away from Coke's monument, Fiennes stopped his truck. In front of us was Holkham Hall, a Palladian-style, sand-colored stately home, which is thought to have about a hundred and fifty rooms. The seventh Earl used to migrate through the house according to the seasons. A few tourists were wandering around. "Look at the sward," Fiennes said. He had opened the truck's door and was staring down at the immaculate, even lawn. "What's in it? It's shit. There's nothing in it. It's shit, poor grass." A pair of fallow deer were watching us. "The perception is 'Wow! This is amazing,'" Fiennes said. "But actually I've got farmed deer, I've got trees dying, and I've got a sward that has not even got clover in it. It's not even got plantain." Plantain is a staple of British meadows and grasslands. "It's got nothing," Fiennes said. "Because at some stage this sward has been *improved*." He sat quietly. "I would love to know what this would have been like a hundred years ago."

For ecological and political reasons, British farming has reached a turning point. When the country became part of the European Economic Community, the forerunner of the European Union, it joined the bloc's Common Agricultural Policy, one of the world's largest farm-subsidy programs. The C.A.P. consumes sixty-five billion dollars a year, about forty per cent of the E.U.'s budget; for decades, it has been criticized for its perverse incentives and environmental impact. In 2016, the C.A.P. was among the bureaucratic monstrosities of the E.U. that helped drive the vote for Brexit. Leaving the bloc has led to the first reform of agricultural policy in almost fifty years. "It is a reset moment," Minette Batters, the leader of the National Farmers Union, told me. Beginning next year, British farming will transition to a new system of support, which will be linked to "public goods," such as water quality and biodiversity. "We're reinventing quite a lot of things at once," Tony Juniper, the chair of Natural England, a public conservation body, said. "It does feel up for grabs."

In a fluid moment, Fiennes's ideas have attracted national attention. Juniper described Fiennes as "one of the motive forces behind this new way of looking at the land." Geoff Sansome, the head of agriculture at Natural England, has worked with Fiennes for more than a decade. "Jake's current canvas is Holkham, but he's got his eyes set on a bigger canvas, quite honestly," Sansome said. "He's on a mission."

Fiennes sees what he does as obvious. "Sometimes I sit and contemplate what I am doing and I think, Isn't this complete common sense?" Fiennes said. "Doesn't everyone think like this?" Late in the afternoon, we headed out of Holkham on a typical Norfolk lane, lined with hedgerows. Hedges, mostly hawthorn and blackthorn, are a distinctive feature of the British countryside. They delineate fields, but they also provide invaluable habitat and food for birds, insects, and plant life. An estimated two hundred and fifty thousand miles of the nation's hedges—about a third of the total—were destroyed in the second half of the twentieth century. Fiennes loves hedges; he keeps pictures of them on his phone. He believes that a proper hedge should be allowed to grow to its natural height, about twelve feet, at which point it forms a natural dome that keeps rain off the wildlife that lives inside.

September is the start of British hedge-cutting season. On either side of the road, harvested wheat fields were lined with brutally cut, square-topped ribbons of vegetation. "This is hedges of no benefit," Fiennes murmured. Then he slammed on his brakes in the middle of a straight section of road. "What the fuck is that?" he yelled, leaning over me to point out of the passenger window. A hawthorn hedge had been cut back almost to its stumps. Some ivy clung on. Fiennes was beside himself. It was an example of what he calls "Taliban farming"—pointlessly hostile to the natural world. "It's got no food," he said. "It's been flailed within an inch of its life. It's . . . what is it? Four feet wide? There's a fucking—a couple of fat pigeon sitting on it. I'm sorry." Fiennes stopped for air. "I come through this bit, and it is just . . . what the fuck? This is a completely fucked landscape."

When Fiennes was about ten years old, he painted his face white to blend in with the chickens that he kept in the garden. His father, Mark, was a tenant farmer in the sixties, before he turned to photography. His mother, Jennifer Lash, known as Jini, wrote her first novel, "The Burial," when she was nineteen, after running away from her family. Jake and Joseph were the youngest of the couple's six children. (They fostered a seventh.) Mark and Jini made money by buying and renovating houses in the English countryside. Fiennes went to thirteen schools. He won't abide a romantic reading of Fiennes family life. "Strapped for cash. Trying to put food on the table. Trying to educate. Leaning on close friends," he recalled.

Fiennes's refuge and passion was nature. For several years, in Wiltshire, the family lived opposite a traditional, mixed English farm. Fiennes kept slowworms, a kind of legless lizard, which he fed slugs. He caught hornets and stored roadkill in the freezer. "If you pull out any family pictures, it's Jake with jellyfish, Jake with insects," Joseph told me. For Fiennes's sixteenth birthday, Jini gave him a stuffed fox, which he keeps in his living room. (Ralph later gave him a towel with a black sheep on it.) I asked Fiennes once if he could explain why he took such a different path from his siblings'. "Actually, the other five were the odd ones out," he replied. "I was the normal one."

Fiennes dropped out of school at sixteen. A friend of his sister Martha got him a job doing P.R. for Limelight, a London night club, which, like its sister outlet in New York, was in a large, deconsecrated church. In 1987, when he was seventeen, Fiennes helped organize a party for George Michael's album "Faith." Limelight flowed with drugs and money. "Maybe I should have pulled out when I found half a kilo of coke in the reception drawer," Fiennes told me. Both Sophie and Joseph described the teen-age Fiennes as a species in the wrong habitat. "He was an animal that needed to get out," Sophie said. Fiennes had a huge expense account; he developed eczema. "Lack of sleep," he told me. "Stolichnaya on ice." His parents arranged for him to dry out at Knepp Castle, in West Sussex, about forty miles south of London. Fiennes turned up to help out for a week during lambing season wearing a black trenchcoat and leather gloves.

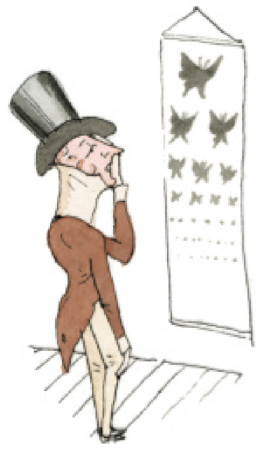
He stayed for three years. The Knepp estate, which covers about three and a half thousand acres, had recently been inherited by Charlie Burrell, a twenty-five-year-old aristocrat. Burrell's girlfriend, a travel writer named Isabella Tree, had lived up the road from the Fienneses as a teen-ager. Soon after Fiennes arrived, the three of them moved in to the castle, which had not been modernized since the war, when it was the headquarters of the 1st Canadian Division. There were coal fires and blackout curtains. The family kept their possessions in old military lockers. "You turned on a light and flew across the room," Tree recalled. Fiennes slept in the bachelor wing, on the top floor.

During the day, he worked on the farm. Fiennes doesn't read easily. He has acquired virtually all his knowledge through conversation and making connections for himself. "It is hysterical questioning," Sophie, who is also dyslexic, told me. "Why is that there? Why was that?" At Knepp, Fiennes befriended a woodman named Chris Wagstaff. "A forester is looking at trees, and he's looking at income from trees," Fiennes explained. "A woodman cares for the wood and maintains it, enhances it. . . . He knows the importance of the bats and the flora." Fiennes cycled through the departments of the farm. With Burrell and Tree, he drank bottles of old wine from the cellar, whose labels had rotted off. Fiennes became close to Burrell, who at the time was struggling with the economics of the estate. "It was very good for me to have Jake around," Burrell said. "The responsibility was pretty crushing."

In 1994, Fiennes left Knepp to work as a gamekeeper at Stanage Castle, in Wales, which ran a commercial pheasant shoot. Each year, the shooting industry releases as many as fifty million game birds—predominantly non-native pheasants—into the British countryside. By some estimates, these birds account for a quarter of the country's avian biomass. "It was industrial," Fiennes told me. He lost an entire hatch, nine and a half thousand chicks, to rotavirus. He had to clear them out with a shovel. "It wasn't great," he said. "And it rained. The fucking rain."

Fiennes's father saw that he was unhappy and, in early 1995, arranged for Fiennes to meet Nicholas Bacon, a landowner in Norfolk who is the premier baronet of England and a close friend of Prince Charles. Bacon's family has owned the Raveningham estate, southeast of Norwich, since 1735. Bacon was a serious beekeeper. When he met Fiennes, who was twenty-four, there wasn't a job opening. But he was struck by Fiennes's ideas about how to look after the birds. "There was definitely an energy and an ambitious energy," Bacon told me. He took on Fiennes as a junior gamekeeper. At the same time, he worried. "What can you do? How can you progress, other than becoming head keeper?" Bacon wondered. "And then what?"

Within six years, Fiennes was running Raveningham. When I met Sophie, I asked her if Fiennes was driven by the same forces that have compelled his more famous siblings. "There is a lot of writing about people performing onstage and imagining that the parent is watching them. I think it's no different," she told me. "I think the real sadness for Jake is that he hasn't had that witness." Jini died in 1993. Mark died in 2004. "I always felt like I was a very poor substitute, witnessing what he had created," Sophie said. "My mother would have just been so totally buzzed by what he was making happen."



At Raveningham, Fiennes's job was to make sure there were birds to shoot. Unusually, the estate did not farm pheasants, instead relying on a surplus of wild game. Fiennes rose before dawn to check about two hundred and fifty traps—for predators such as rats, stoats, and weasels—across the five and a half thousand acres of the estate, before walking the fields and hedgerows, inspecting nesting sites for pheasant chicks and sawfly populations that they would eat. "He was a complete man of nature," Bacon said. Fiennes tracked foxes by following the alarm calls of blackbirds. He got drenched in the dew.

During Fiennes's first season, there were blank drives—times when there were no birds in the air. He noticed that the estate's bags—its shooting records—had peaked in 1963, during the country's switch to intensive agriculture. The reason that so many pheasants are released in Britain each year is that there is no food or space for them on modern farmland. Between 1967 and 2010, the population of the gray partridge, the country's traditional hunting quarry, fell by ninety-one per cent. Fiennes realized that Raveningham's game birds were in danger of disappearing. "It was at the point where if you don't do something drastic you will lose something," he said.

In the late nineties, the farming operation at Raveningham went Taliban. A new estate manager shifted away from cereals to crops such as carrots, potatoes, and fruit, which were more lucrative but also more resource-intensive. The hedges were flailed. Fields were sown to the edges and doused in chemicals. Fiennes watched the estate's bird and insect populations shrink further. At the time, the C.A.P. ordered farmers to set aside ten per cent of their land, to limit food production, but allowed them to spray and mow their fallow fields in the spring. "Everything that is going to nest in it, you are just going to kill it," Fiennes said. "Who the fuck dreamed that up?"

The estate used paraquat, a herbicide that killed hares. Fiennes despaired. "You don't see it from the tractor cab," he said. "You see it on the ground." One day, he broke down in a field and wept. "I could take you to the spot right now," he said. "The guys that see the rainforest destruction, they're emotional and everything." Fiennes confronted Bacon about what he was witnessing, and the new manager left.

In 2001, Bacon contracted out the farming work at Raveningham and put Fiennes in charge of the estate. The baronet summarizes Fiennes's environmental approach to agriculture as "farming badly." Fiennes prefers to speak about making space for nature. In 2002, Fiennes took a hundred and forty acres that had been drained in the sixties, to plant crops, and used earthmovers to turn the area back into wetlands, which he used to graze cattle. Birds that had been absent—lapwing, snipe, and marsh harriers—came rushing back. The marshes now have higher breeding rates than surrounding nature reserves. "I want more edge. Everything is about edge," he told me once. "Whatever it is—mower, mouth, footpath, deer trail . . . I put my footprint on the ground, I create an edge." Fiennes planted twenty-five miles of hedges across the estate and thinned the woodlands, bringing in light. He replanted trees according to marks on old maps and brought back sheep to graze the lawn for the first time in a hundred years.

It is a form of order that he craves. "Nature is random, but it is wonderfully organized," Fiennes said. "You start throwing any sort of regular management theme and it starts to react." One of his greatest pleasures is to realign a field. Fiennes looks for wet patches, changes in soil, and corners where a combine harvester or a boom spray can't reach—and turns the land over to plants that will benefit birds and insects. Raveningham's fields came to contain triangles and rectangles of wildflowers where Fiennes ruled that crops would be unproductive. He did this by compulsive observation. "Why aren't the cattle going here? And why is the crow sitting on that post but not that one? And the fox is walking up this path," Fiennes said. "You can just feel how it is all working with one another."

While Fiennes modified the farming at Raveningham, his friends at Knepp Castle stopped growing crops altogether. In 2001, Burrell and Tree began the process of turning the estate over to nature; Knepp is now one of the country's best-known re-wilding projects. Through the years, Fiennes and Burrell have encouraged each other. "You need to have someone say, 'Just get on to it. What are you waiting for?'" Burrell told me. But Fiennes does not associate the recovery of the countryside with abandonment. "How can I engage with a hundred and four thousand farm holdings in England and you're saying, 'Just let it go'? I can't," Fiennes said. "Everything has got to be managed."

Fiennes prefers to think of wildlife as another product to be grown as efficiently as possible. At Raveningham, he invited researchers to count moths and to identify the snails in the ponds. He centralized the farm buildings and encouraged neighboring farmers to pool assets, such as vehicles. On a two-hundred-and-fifty-acre plot on the estate, Fiennes removed buildings and aligned openings in the hedges to reduce vehicle movements and soil compaction—a kind of farming Taylorism—which meant that the crops could be cultivated in nine days. The plot was one of the most profitable parts of the estate.

For many years, Fiennes's job title remained gamekeeper. He checked his traps and then went for meetings at the estate office, working fourteen-hour days. He married an equine nurse, and they lived in a converted red brick schoolhouse with their two young children. In part because of his overwork, Fiennes's marriage foundered. He developed alopecia. His hair fell out and grew back white. The schoolhouse sat in the corner of a field. Outside, Fiennes would experiment with a band of hay meadow that he planted along the hedge. Orchids crept in from a wood nearby. In the evenings, he counted cowslips with his daughter, Teale. "I think one year it was eleven, and the next year there were twenty-seven, and the next year there were thirty-seven," Fiennes recalled. "And then the next year it was just 'Fuck. There are too many. There are thousands.'"

On the day that Britain voted to leave the E.U., Fiennes was judging a local agricultural competition with Mark Cocker, a nature writer. Cocker lives seven miles from Raveningham. For years, he had heard of a maverick gamekeeper who was doing interesting things on the estate. In 2015, Cocker finally met Fiennes for an article he was writing about shooting. He was bowled over by the hedges, the hares, and the abundant birdlife. One day, Fiennes rang him up because a field of cover crops, which he had planted as sheep feed, was alive with pollen beetles and swarming with hundreds of swifts and house martins.

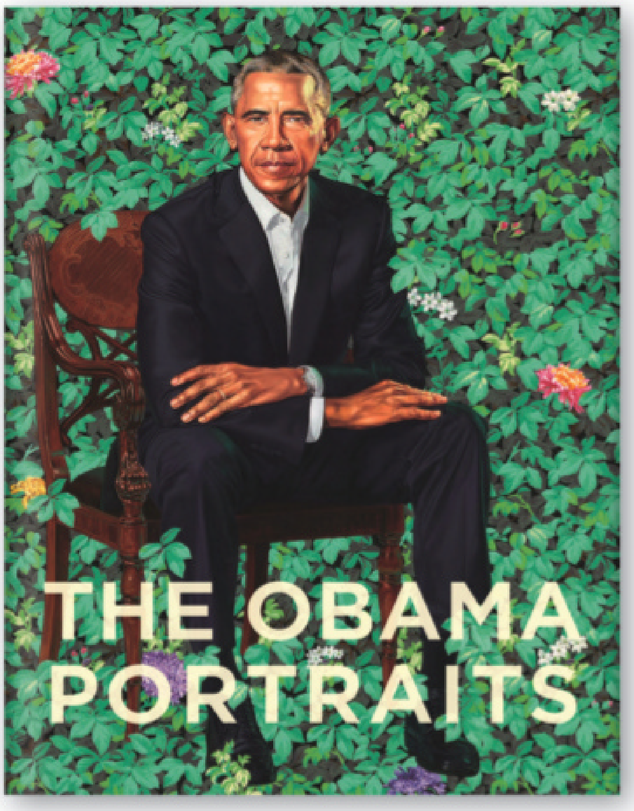
"The critical thing about Jake is, because he is obsessive-compulsive, he is obsessive-compulsive about his conservation work in a way that almost no land managers are," Cocker said. At Raveningham, Fiennes removed about twenty per cent of the estate, more than a thousand acres, from food production. But his yields increased enough to cancel out the difference.

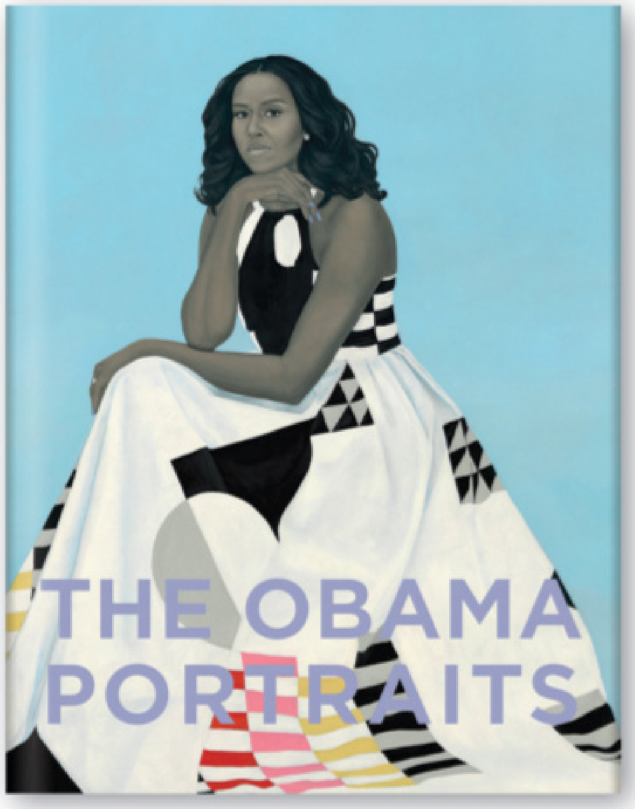
Cocker is an authority on British birds and a severe critic of modern agriculture. In 2018, he published "Our Place," a book about the British countryside. Cocker devoted a chapter to Fiennes, who he believes offers a middle way, of both growing food and restoring the environment. Much of what Fiennes does is simply an exacting form of traditional, mixed British farming. But understanding the dynamics of this system—a complex interplay of soil health, carbon sequestration, livestock disturbance, insect life and birdlife—is an emerging science. In 2015, after a six-year study, researchers at the U.K. Centre for Ecology & Hydrology concluded that harvests of major commodities, including wheat, remained steady when eight per cent of fields were given over to wildlife-friendly grasses and flowers. The yields of some crops, such as field beans, rose by thirty-five per cent. "He's a radical in the sense that this actually can be delivered," Cocker told me. "This is a change in the entirety of British agriculture, which Jake could exemplify."

Farmers across the world benefit from state support. On January 31st, Britain left the E.U. The country now faces the question of what kinds of subsidies its farmers should receive. The C.A.P. has accounted for about half the income of most farms, a total of £3.5 billion a year. Eighty per cent of this came in the form of a "basic payment" for how much land the farmers looked after, with most of the rest coming from environmental incentives. (At Raveningham, Fiennes supplemented the estate's income by taking part in dozens of these initiatives.) In January, 2018, Michael Gove, the U.K.'s Environment Secretary at the time, announced that, after Brexit, farmers would be paid "public money for public goods"—such as projects to improve soil health, plant trees, and mitigate climate change. Gove also announced a new, twenty-five-year plan for the British environment, based on the principle of "natural capital," in which the nation's air, water, soil, and biodiversity will be reimagined as an economic resource.

The plan is largely the result of work by Dieter Helm, an economist at the University of Oxford. Helm, who is sixty-three, spent much of his childhood on his grandparents' farm, on the Essex coast. In 1967, when he was eleven, his grandparents sold up. He watched the new farmer blow up the hedgerows. "I remember that dynamite going off," Helm told me. "I knew which birds nested where. I knew exactly where the barn owl was. I knew the whole thing." Since 2012, Helm, who is also an expert on energy and utilities markets, has been

A richly illustrated celebration of the paintings of President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama





The Obama Portraits
Taína Caragol, Dorothy Moss,
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the chair of the government's Natural Capital Committee.

According to Helm, it is possible that British farming, which has revenues of around nine billion pounds a year, is currently worthless—once you take away its subsidies and the damage that it causes to the nation's waterways and wildlife. But the benefits offered by new forms of agriculture, such as vertical farming, or the restoration of wetlands, to sequester carbon, or nature-friendly food production, such as Fiennes's, are potentially enormous. "I think the tide has gone out on the agricultural system we have. I think that's over," Helm said. "If you look at where the science is going, we have this fabulous opportunity not to drench the land in chemicals and actually to use the land to much greater effect."

Helm is not naïve about the state of the natural world. "If you scratch deep down, I think we're stuffed," he said, when we met in his rooms in Oxford last year. "If you look globally, it looks awful. But it doesn't get you anywhere." Even pessimists accept that Brexit has offered a chance for the nation's farms to take a new path. In 2021, the government plans to begin a seven-year transition out of the C.A.P. and into the new Environmental Land Management System.

Some farms will go bankrupt. The U.K.'s National Audit Office has described the move to ELMS as "complex, difficult and high-risk." The median age of British farmers is sixty. An estimated forty-two per cent of English farmers rely on the C.A.P. to break even. "It's going to be quite a time of turmoil," Sansome, of Natural England, told me. "And it's inevitable there will be some casualties." Batters, the National Farmers Union president, pointed out that raising environmental standards will also leave British farmers competing with food produced under lower standards overseas. The sector will be vulnerable in post-Brexit trade negotiations with the E.U. and the U.S. "It is all very well doing the right thing," Batters said. "But if you are going to have to import food that doesn't abide by those rules, all you are going to do is put your guys out of business."

Fiennes voted against Brexit, but he quickly embraced its implications for farming. After the vote, he invited journalists and policymakers on tours of Raveningham. "We need the twelve apostles of agriculture," he told me once, half joking. He has pushed for Holkham to become a test bed for the new farming policy. "The opportunity at the moment is phenomenal," he said. Last summer, Lord Leicester committed Holkham to becoming "cides-free" by 2030.

In November, Fiennes and James Beamish, Holkham's farm manager, gave a tour to officials from the U.K.'s Department for Environment, Food, & Rural Affairs. A few weeks earlier, a tenant had given up a lease on two hundred and fifty acres of fields—about the size of an average British farm—which would become a pilot for environmental farming. We stood on a sloping path in a cold wind. The plot, known as Great Farm, wasn't in great shape. The previous tenant was lifting his last crop, of sugar beets, and a tractor trailer rumbled past. In front of us, a field of oilseed rape had failed, infested by cabbage-stem flea beetles, which can arise when crop rotations are bunched too close together. "They have farmed it quite hard, shall we say," Beamish said. He invited the officials to inspect the withered plants. "They look as though they've been shot with a shotgun."

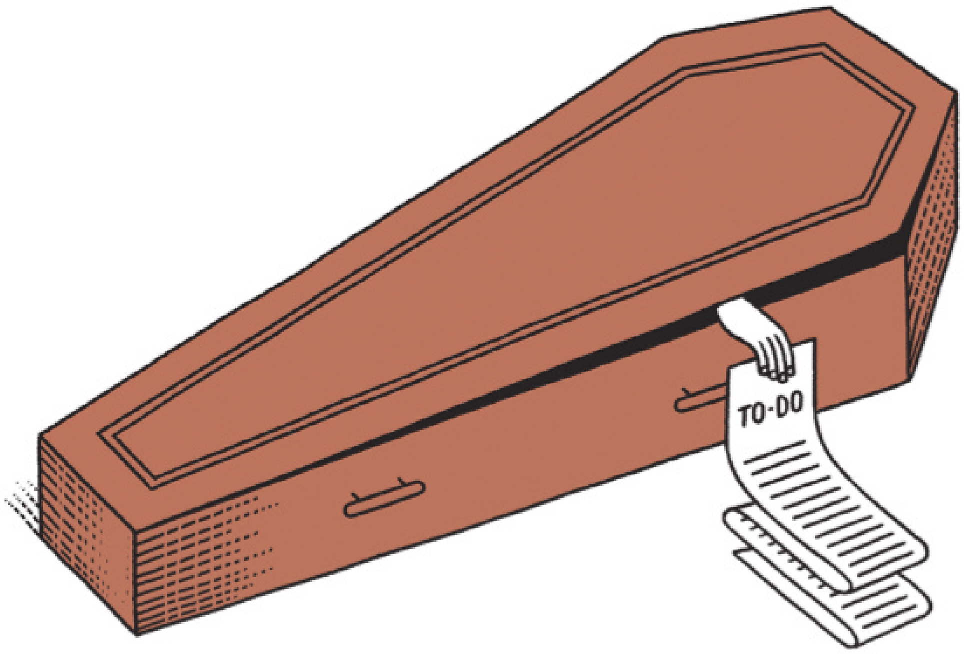
During the winter, Fiennes and Beamish were conducting baseline counts of birds and mammals on the site. Scientists were testing soil cores. Following the Earl's pledge, Beamish was planning to cut chemical use to a minimum. "We've relied very heavily on what comes out of the plastic can or out of a fertilizer bag, and where has that got us today?" Beamish said to the officials. Beamish is a veteran Norfolk farmer. When Fiennes was hired at Holkham, he was skeptical. "The alarm bells went off a little bit," Beamish told me. "What are we in for?" On the track at Great Farm, he sounded like a convert. Fiennes explained that the experiment must be replicable. "We need to demonstrate that what we are doing is currently available to everyone," he said. "We don't want to be doing anything really unique."

Fiennes starts the day with coffee and a cigarette. One morning last fall, around dawn, we drove out to some low-lying fields, which used to be salt creeks. As he did at Raveningham, Fiennes had hired a ditcher to reinstate the old water channels and create new ones, ahead of turning the fields into grazing wetlands. Fiennes drove his truck slowly along the fresh, muddy scars in the ground, which would flood in the winter. "Sexy curves, love it," he said. "This is going to be amazing. Edge, lots of edge. Lots of dead ends." He talked about a software project that he was commissioning to calculate an equation of surface water, grass height, and cattle-stocking density for the perfect management of lapwing. He kept a running commentary on the grasses and the weeds. "This is silverweed, and then you have got groundsel," Fiennes said. "It will be interesting to see how the geese react. Those thistles, seed for the goldfinches." Two birds took off, bobbing frantically in flight. "Snipe," Fiennes said. "Very good to eat."

Fiennes caught up with the ditcher in a field close to Holkham Beach, not far from where my friends encountered him last summer. Lord Leicester, in blue running shorts, was in the cab, talking to the contractor. The field was next to Lady Anne's Drive, the main entrance to Holkham's nature reserve. The road is lined with poplar trees, planted about forty years ago, which Fiennes is planning to cut down and replace with scrubs and bushes, to restore the original landscape of the wetlands. He felt that the trees were also blocking the view of the marshes and the birds. "I have the opportunity to engage with a fuck of a lot of people," he said. "I see it as my duty to try and force nature down their throat."

A few months later, we were back on Lady Anne's Drive. There had been heavy rain during the fall, and Fiennes's new wetlands were shining under a low, late-afternoon sun. There were wigeon and teal and pink-footed geese, which overwinter in the tens of thousands in north Norfolk on their way to Greenland. The previous weekend, wardens had counted about eighty thousand birds at Holkham. A line of bird-watchers, with cameras and telescopes, had materialized at the edge of the parking lot. The light was failing, and the wetlands were still. Without warning, a host of lapwing took off on our right. "Look at that, they are all getting up!" Fiennes called. "Fucking clouds of them. Phenomenal." The lapwing wheeled against the sunset. Coke's monument showed above the trees. ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS



TO MY RELATIVES

BY JACK HANDEY

Dear Relatives,

If you are reading this, I am dead. Or I am close to death. Or you have been snooping through my papers.

Let's assume that I am dead. I HEREBY REQUEST that you, my relatives and kin, carry out my wishes regarding the following:

MY LETTERS: As you will see in the garage, boxes No. 12 through 26 contain my letters. I have saved every letter I have ever received, including letters from collection agencies. Please go through the letters, reading each one, and divide them into important and unimportant letters.

I donate the important letters to you, my relatives, to divide fairly among yourselves. I urge you to go back through the "unimportant" letters and see if there might still be some important ones in there.

MY PETS: Please adopt and provide loving homes for my dogs, Snappy and Bitey; my cat, Sprayer; and my goldfish, Methuselah.

MY CLOTHING: Please help yourself to my suits. You will notice that, because of my unusual physique, the suit pants are size Extra Extra Large and Extra Extra Extra Large, while the suit jackets are size Tiny and Extra Tiny.

MY LIBRARY: Please donate my collection of books—all five of them—to the local library.

PORNO: Also, please donate my pornography collection (boxes 30 to 45) to the local library.

MY COINS: In the attic, you will find many, many quart jars of pennies. I'm not sure how many. Please spend these pennies on whatever you would like. You may want to cash them in at the bank. However, I'm told that banks will not accept pennies unless they are wrapped in coin wrappers. Maybe that could be a family project, to remember me by.

MY GUNS: As some of you know, I have many guns, scattered throughout the house. Most are loaded, so please be careful opening drawers, closets, and medicine cabinets.

MY PUSH LAWNMOWER: Please donate this to Goodwill, after first cleaning off all the bits of grass and dog poop that have got stuck on it over the years. Also, please sharpen the blades with the hand sharpener (somewhere in box 28). Oil and rebalance the wheels.

MY CAR: Sorry, but it's still stuck in the surf at Party Beach. It's yours if you can tow it out.

MY "MURDER": Please send an anonymous letter to the police, claiming that my friend Don killed me.

MY SAFE-DEPOSIT BOX: Attached to this letter is a key. It is the key to my safe-deposit box. Take the key to the bank and open the box. Inside you will find another key. This is the spare key to the box. Take both keys to the bank officer in charge of safe-deposit boxes and close out the account. You may have to fill out some paperwork and pay for back rent.

TRAPDOOR: The trapdoor no longer works. I think the neighborhood kids broke it. Please cover the button with a piece of duct tape.

SKULL: As you've probably noticed, there is a human skull on the shelf in the dining room. This was sold to me as the skull of Khrushchev, the Russian leader. It was a damned lie! I don't even think it's Russian! Still, it's pretty cool. First dibs gets it. (Suggestion: as a funny gag, put a cigarette between its teeth, like he's smoking it.)

MY WIND CHIMES: As you know, I have more than a hundred wind chimes hanging down from the eaves of my house. Please help yourself. Unfortunately, some of the wind chimes have been damaged by the next-door neighbors.

MY REMAINS: Please have me cremated. Then form the ashes into the shape of me. Then deep-fry me. Then bury me with full military honors (even though I was never in the military).

MY HOUSE: A real-estate agent told me that my house, if it were totally renovated (plumbing, electrical, roof, etc.), and if the bats and raccoons and yellow jackets could be expelled from the attic, and if somehow the house's "tilt" could be fixed, would sell for about what I paid for it forty years ago.

I smell another family project! ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

THE FUGITIVE CURE

Can slavery reënactments set us free?

BY JULIAN LUCAS

A gunshot echoed over starlit forest near the town of Marine on St. Croix, Minnesota. It was late October, already frigid, and chasers had pushed our group of ten fugitives to the edge of a lake. For a moment, we'd hesitated, shouts drawing closer as the black water winked, but the shot drove us all straight in. My legs went numb; Elyse, a high-school sophomore, exclaimed, “My *God!*” Submerged to the waist, I waded through marsh grass and lamplight toward our conductor, who silently indicated the opposite bank. The Drinking Gourd shone overhead with exaggerated clarity. This was my third Underground Railroad Reënactment.

An hour had elapsed by the time we crossed the lake: seven teens, two elementary-school teachers, one “abolitionist,” and me. I had no idea where we were, only that it was about two hundred miles from Canada, where Justin Trudeau had just won reëlection after a blackface scandal, and forty from the waters of Lake Minnetonka, in which Prince orders Apollonia to “purify” herself in “Purple Rain.” As we stepped ashore, I thought of my enslaved forebears, wondering what they might make of our strange tribute.

“That's what you're concerned about, your ChapStick?” Elyse chided Max, a blond boy in a blue hat and checkered Vans. His lip balm was ruined—as was my notebook—but the baby doll he'd sworn to carry North was dry. (Elyse dubbed him Mother Max.) The whispers stopped with the arrival of our conductor, who led us on a rough path uphill. I was still smarting from a branch to the forehead when he stopped to deliver the night's sixth lecture: “My name is Henry David Thoreau. This is Walden Pond.”

Remembrance culture posits that we must not only honor history but relive it.

For more than three decades, students have reënacted escapes on the Underground Railroad at schools, camps, churches, museums, and juvenile-correction centers across the United States. Millions have undergone an experience that can range from a board game to an immersive nightlong ordeal, complete with horseback-riding paddy rollers and an armed Harriet Tubman. One group's living-history lesson is another's exercise in leadership training, anti-racist therapy, or even behavioral reform. Many believe that Underground Railroad Reënactments, or U.G.R.R.s, have the power to morally transform American youth.

You might call it the fugitive cure. Though it's left an impression on everyone from Lena Dunham to Disney's former chairman Michael Eisner, the U.G.R.R. began in Minnesota, with a small organization currently known as the Kambui Education Initiative. Last fall, I flew to Minneapolis for the group's final reënactment of the year. It took place at Wilder Forest, a thousand-acre recreation area now home to the charter school River Grove. A forty-minute drive from the city, past horse farms and slivers of lake, it's rustic enough to pass for the nineteenth century, when St. Paul's real Underground Railroad spirited the captives of summering slaveholders through woods not far from these.

I took inventory of my fellow-participants in the school's cafeteria. To my left sat two white elementary-school teachers; on my right, four girls from a local arts program, three black and one Asian, laughed and gossiped. The final trio, two white boys and a black girl, were friends from high-school orchestra. After learning about the simulation from his father, Will invited Max and Elyse, who agreed to attend despite initially finding the idea “sketchy.” When I asked if they'd studied slavery, they

ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY RUSSO

shook their heads. “We’re stuck in the Monroe Doctrine,” Elyse said sadly, as though personally stranded in 1823.

The orientation began near sunset, with the arrival of Chris Crutchfield. A gregarious Morehouse graduate with a neat mustache and a slightly beaverish smile, Crutchfield, fifty, began running U.G.R.R.s in the nineteen-eighties. Now he’s the program’s foremost evangelist, a passionate outdoorsman who teaches litigation at a local college and serves as a deputy director of the Ramsey County correctional department.

“Freedom is like air,” Crutchfield said, as we finished a breath-holding contest. “And, just like we’re swimming in a sea of air, we’re also swimming in a sea of freedom. It’s not completely free—just like the air isn’t completely clean—but the freedom we enjoy right now, compared to the freedom that enslaved Africans had, is unbelievable.”

Volunteers stood to dramatize moments in the lecture. Elyse represented a woman being auctioned; Max, a hunger striker force-fed on a slave-ship deck. We assembled in tight lines to approximate the Middle Passage, and Crutchfield illustrated the mortality rate by walking up and down the columns: “You’d be dead, you’d be dead—Julian, you’re dead.”

Still, the emphasis was on uplift, the power of a courageous example to convert the hard-hearted to liberty’s cause. Crutchfield relayed the story of Eliza in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” a runaway who carries her infant across the thawing ice of the Ohio River, and whose bravery became a staple of nineteenth-century melodrama. Her real-life counterpart, he told us, inspired Stowe, whose novel, in turn, helped spark the Civil War. The moral force of one flight transformed America, and, through reënactment, might very well do so again: “It’s about one person deciding they want freedom, and inspiring the whole country to do the right thing.”

Identifying with fugitives is nothing new in America. “I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of dogs,” Walt Whitman wrote, in “Song of Myself.” D. H. Lawrence once described the country as a “vast republic of escaped slaves.” More recently, the runaway has emerged as the emblematic figure of a renovated national mythology, hero of a land that increasingly sees its Founding Fathers as settler-colonist génocidaires. In their stead rises a patriotism centered on slavery and abolition, and a campaign to set the country’s age-old freedom cult on a newly progressive footing.

“I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves,” Michelle Obama said at the Democratic National Convention in 2016. No words have better captured the movement to recognize slavery as the nation’s narrative cornerstone and its citizens’ most consequential inheritance. This America’s founding mother is Harriet Tubman—in the recent film “Harriet,” Cynthia Erivo’s Tubman leads black Union Army soldiers in a tableau that evokes Emanuel Leutze’s “Washington Crossing the Delaware”—and its year zero is 1619, when the first slave ships docked in Virginia. Last year, the *Times Magazine* proposed the date as the country’s birthday; in the opening essay, Nikole Hannah-Jones argued that enslaved people and their descendants were the true “perfecters of this democracy.”

“Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife,” John Dewey, a forerunner of today’s experiential educators, wrote. But how does one “teach” slavery as a matter of experience? The rise of remembrance culture created an imperative not only to honor but in some way to *relive*. What may have begun with the neo-slave narratives of the nineteen-seventies and eighties, like Octavia Butler’s “Kindred” and Toni Morrison’s “Beloved,” migrated to popular explorations of slavery’s afterlife. In 1993, the year Morrison won the Nobel Prize in Literature, Disney announced a ride, never completed, in which visitors would “feel what it was like to be a slave [and] to escape through the Underground Railroad.”

In the next decade, Colonial Williamsburg staged a slave auction; a replica of the Amistad set sail from Mystic Seaport; and the “experimental historian” Anthony Cohen had himself crated and shipped from Philadelphia to New York in homage to the antebellum fugitive Henry (Box) Brown. With financial backing from Oprah, Cincinnati constructed an imposing Underground Railroad Freedom Center that fronts the Ohio River. The National Park Service consecrated more than six hundred sites

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in a coast-to-coast Underground Railroad "Network to Freedom." In Maryland, Congress established a four-hundred-and-eighty-acre Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park; Obama's Treasury Department planned to put Tubman on the twenty-dollar bill.

By 2016, when Colson Whitehead's "Underground Railroad" won the National Book Award for fiction, slave narratives had become inseparable from the fraught politics of commemoration. In one sly passage, the novel's fugitive heroine finds a job on free soil as a "slave" in a museum diorama, raising the question of whom the slave-narrative renaissance really serves. Do fugitive lives belong to everyone, as models and martyrs of democracy? Or are they victims of appropriation, their stories warped by repetitive reconciliation myths and kitsch entertainment? Can "embodying" the past empower the living, or does it trivialize history and traumatize its inheritors?

Night had fallen by the time we stepped outside. We formed a line, tied on blindfolds, and placed our hands on one another's shoulders, starting downhill through shallows of brittle leaves. "I want you to imagine that the year is 1840," Crutchfield whispered. Imagine, he said, life on a plantation, the day before escaping, and the night. What would you take with you? Would you risk saying goodbye?

Soon Crutchfield was gone. When we removed our blindfolds, the building was nowhere in sight, only stars and trees. A man stepped from the shadows, calling us after him with the code words "friend of a friend." Within minutes, slave hunters gave chase, rattling chains and shouting taunts from the darkness. Sprinting off through brambles, we dove for cover at our guide's signal. I spent the next five minutes with burrs in my hair, trying to hide in a sapling's underfed shadow.

Running through the forest at night is weirdly exhilarating. You end up playing hopscotch in the underbrush, and flailing at imagined obstacles like a startled cat. Eventually, you learn to coöperate. People offered hands and reassurances. Sometimes, as in a game of telephone, whispered warnings raced down the line. Elyse held a branch as I walked under it. Will joined Max in his search for a lost hat. "The path we're about to take, there is no path," a conductor told us. We began to move as one.

The night was full of parables. A woman facing auction begged us to save her baby sister; Max volunteered ("Yeah, sure"), and a long silence passed before the girls reminded him to retrieve the doll. Another bondman confided that he helped fugitives as penance for betraying two young runaways who were subsequently killed. His story ended with an injunction to live respectably in free territory: "They're going to be watching how you do your studies, how you respect your elders, how you respect each other. So, Africans, can y'all try to show others the right way?"

A barnside encounter with Lucretia Mott began with the Quaker abolitionist checking her privilege: "You must look at me and think, What does a white woman know? She's never known the true horror injustice can bring. And I don't." Her tale of gender discrimination at the World Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840 was followed by the arrival of our pursuers. Mott ushered us into a crawl space, where we spent a few cramped minutes the way that Harriet Jacobs—who evaded capture in her grandmother's attic—spent seven years.

We carried on from lamp to lamp, lesson to lesson, conductor to conductor. Tubman, a small, dreadlocked figure, addressed us in a Miles Davis rasp. "You might be tired, you might be cold," she said. "But soon you're going to be free." She told the story of an elderly passenger who endangered the group by threatening to turn back. Tubman had persuaded him to keep going—at gunpoint.

For an earlier generation, Tubman was a grandmotherly singer of spirituals; now she's a fierce young liberator. "She Came to Slay," a recent illustrated biography by Erica Armstrong Dunbar, features a revolver-wielding Tubman on the cover; Ta-Nehisi Coates's novel "The Water Dancer" endows her with a supernatural power that causes her to emit green light. In "Harriet," Erivo's Tubman evolves from drowning refugee to crimson-robed equestrian savior, like a wilderness prophet who returns to deliver her people.

Our Tubman made us promise to leave no one behind. I paired up with the fourth-grade teacher, taking her by the hand as we repeated, "If you don't get to freedom, I don't get to freedom."

The skits reminded me of Sunday school. I couldn't help remembering that enslaved people rarely escaped; that those who did were usually captured; and that the Underground Railroad, more culturally popular than historically significant, often eclipses a more representative reality. The only known runaway in my lineage, Moses Lucas, didn't rub shoulders with abolitionist luminaries on a self-discovery field trip. During the Civil War, he crossed the Rappahannock River, mustered into the Tenth U.S. Colored Infantry, and promptly fell too ill to fight.

My skepticism relented when, halfway through the evening, our group entered a clearing nearly as wide as Central Park. After the forest's tangle, simply walking felt like becoming weightless. I looked up at the stars shining above Minnesota's ten thousand lakes. The group slowed, drifted apart, and grew quiet. Once we reached the other side, I hardly noticed the dim silhouettes of parked cars and quonset huts; for an instant, our surroundings rose to the dignity of the past we presumed to reënact.

There are few happy meetings between black history and the romance of the American landscape. The Mississippi was slavery's superhighway, Manifest Destiny was the original white flight, and the first recorded African-American to see the Pacific Ocean was William Clark's slave, York. If the runaway endures, it might be as the first black citizen of our democratic sublime, seeker of a freedom that isn't so much up North as somewhere within.

In 1998, a Minneapolis news station ran a segment on the creator of the Underground Railroad Reënactment. Night-vision footage of a van packed with blindfolded teens suggests a kidnapping. Riding shotgun is a wiry man with thick bifocals and a baseball cap fringed with mosquito netting, who stares out the window as they rumble down a dirt road on a rural military base. His name is Kamau Kambui.

"You think our ancestors knew where they were going?" he says.

"No," the teens reply.

"That is the same feeling that I want you to have," he says. "You can read in a book what it feels like. You can see it on a video. But tonight you have the opportunity to *feel* the Underground Railroad."

The teens are loosed into a forest. A chaser cracks a bullwhip in darkness; shoes disappear in thick mud, which a conductor claims is "full of snakes." The reporter praises the event as an opportunity for black kids to "live" their culture, identifying several participants as at-risk. They end the two-hour course pumping their arms to shouts of "Freedom!" In an accompanying interview, Kambui cuts an almost monastic figure, committed to his reënactments despite a diagnosis of terminal lymphoma. He credits the idea for the simulation to "a message from the ancestors." Within a year, he'd joined their company, succumbing to cancer at the age of fifty.

In 2015, shortly after finding this video, I flew to Minnesota to learn everything I could about Kamau Kambui. The first person I met was Crutchfield, who took over Kambui's U.G.R.R.s following his death, in 1998. We met at a sleek coffee shop in downtown St. Paul, but he quickly whisked me out the door with a declaration: "This is the wrong café. We have to go to the black café." Ten minutes later, we sat down at Golden Thyme, in St. Paul's historically black Rondo district. There Crutchfield seemed to know everyone, and everyone seemed to have known Kamau Kambui.

They described a perennially broke, ascetically disciplined bachelor who spent nearly all his time mentoring youths. Born Oliver Taylor in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1948, Kamau Sababu Kambui moved to North Minneapolis in the early nineteen-eighties, saying little about his previous endeavors but quickly making friends. "He was *fine*," Jackie, a friend of Crutchfield's, said. Valerie, a late-life girlfriend, added, "Kamau belonged to the community."

A teetotalling vegetarian with an unlikely passion for guns, he was rarely found in the tiny apartment where he used to store books in the oven. Instead, he ice-fished, rock climbed, quarterbacked, roller-skated, and honed his marksmanship. Yamro Fields, the second-born of his seven children, compared him to Annie Oakley.

Kambui lectured on wild edibles and folk medicine; organized storytelling festivals and kayaking expeditions; intervened, often at the request of mothers, in the lives of wayward boys; and took city kids to the wilderness as an instructor for Outward Bound. "He had a real desire to lift up black boys and black girls," Crutchfield said. "You could drop him off with two hundred kids and some duct tape and some dental floss, and they'd have a great time."

The defining adventure of his own youth was a radical experiment in black self-determination. As an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, Kambui pledged allegiance to a Malcolm X-inspired secessionist movement called the Republic of New Afrika. The R.N.A. declared independence from the United States in March, 1968, laying claim to Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Its founders argued that these states were New Afrikan territory, earned through labor and long fought for by leaders like "our Generals Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vessey, Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman." Their slogan was "Free the Land!"

In 1971, Kambui left college and moved to Jackson, Mississippi. He canvassed farmers across the Delta for the R.N.A., seeking support for a secessionist plebiscite. In a memoir, the would-be nation's then president describes "pleasant, conscientious Kamau" as the leader of the organizing effort. He also notes the young man's remarkable gun collection, which soon came to the attention of federal authorities. Amid a violent crackdown on the R.N.A., Kambui was arrested for buying a firearm under his not-yet-legally-adopted name. He was sentenced to five years in federal prison.

Kambui remained a lifelong Afrocentrist, always reading and occasionally susceptible to outlandish theories about the ancient Egyptians. (One friend said that he believed Pharaoh Tutankhamun died in a glider accident.) Today, some would

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Edward Steichen, *White Lotus*, dye transfer print, 1939, printed 1940. Estimate $50,000 to $75,000.

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likely call him a "hotep," a put-down for esoterically inclined, masculinity-obsessed black men. But the figure he most revered was Harriet Tubman. He kept a jar of earth from her grave.

Kambui often claimed that a recurring dream about Tubman had inspired the Underground Railroad Reënactment, and that he had organized the first simulation after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968. The first U.G.R.R. I can confirm, however, took place in 1987, and may have drawn as much from "Go Down, Moses"—a 1963 episode of the historical anthology series "The Great Adventure," starring Ruby Dee as Tubman—as from any dream. After simulations, Kambui sometimes screened the episode, which is a near-blueprint of the Kambui Initiative's reënactments. Characters whisper "friend of a friend," hide in a Quaker's crawl space, smuggle a baby through a bog, and flee chasers in a climactic river crossing.

Early U.G.R.R.s were rudimentary. Sometimes Kambui would run the simulation as a one-man show; in other instances, slave catchers gave chase with firecrackers and squirt guns. At first, Kambui offered simulations through black youth-leadership programs, but around 1990 he took a job at Wilder Forest, then a nonprofit camp and retreat center. Wilder came with staff, land, activist inclinations, and thousands of yearly visitors; in the busy season, Kambui ran two or more reënactments a week.

He began to incorporate horses, dogs, large casts of conductors, and, in one instance, a rented paddle steamer, which he transformed into a slave ship by blacking out the windows and carpeting the lower deck in straw. It was the second part of a three-day simulation for sixty black teens, which began at an ersatz African village, continued with real farm labor and a night escape, and ended with a mind trick: Kambui took participants to breakfast at a local restaurant, where, by prearrangement, white staff members denied them service.

"It was pure gold," Karen McKinney, who played a slave trader on the boat, told me. Now a scholar of Biblical studies, and a longtime advocate of experiential learning, McKinney believes that, with the right instructor, "risky" simulations can be pedagogically invaluable.

"Kamau was an action figure," Melvin Carter III told me. Once among McKinney's captives, and now St. Paul's first African-American mayor, he remembers the experience as a crucial life lesson. When Carter and three friends staged a "rebellion," refusing to stand for a slave auction, Kambui picked one of them up and threw him into the St. Croix River. Carter wrote down what he said next: "Fellas, I appreciate your resolve. But look around you. The women, children, and old folks you all love will need men like you to be strong enough to suffer whatever it takes to be around when they need protection. Don't just take yourself out of the game for nothing."

In Paul Beatty's satirical novel "The Sellout," the protagonist's father is a practitioner of "Liberation Psychology," who cultivates his son's race consciousness through a variety of cruel, Pavlovian experiments. (The punch line is that his son grows up to own a slave and reëstablish segregation in modern California, as a way to foster black solidarity.) With similar zeal, Kambui fixated on the contemporary notion that black adolescents faced a crisis of character. Amid the racist law-and-order panic of the nineteen-nineties, when Minneapolis was briefly known as "Murderapolis," he volunteered with a Twin Cities group of black men called Save Our Sons (S.O.S.), which mentored local boys thought to have criminal proclivities. The founder was Melvin Carter, Jr., a St. Paul police sergeant and the father of the current mayor. U.G.R.R.s were "one of the keys to recapturing our youth," Carter told me when we spoke at Golden Thyme. "You get these inner-city tough kids up in the woods and they cry like babies."

Outdoor education has often served to forge collective identity. Lord Baden-Powell modelled the Boy Scouts on his experiences in the British Army. Twentieth-century American summer camps encouraged white middle-class kids to reënact "Indian" life in redface, as though to siphon some Native essence from the landscape. Perhaps, for Kambui, the U.G.R.R. was a black variation on the same ritual, a way of freeing the land by making young people feel free within it.

At the same time, Yamro described his father's reënactments as a break with his black-nationalist past: "He went from being a hard-core revolutionary to being a hard-core humanist, working with children of all races."

At Wilder, Kambui introduced the U.G.R.R. to thousands. His increasingly diverse runaways ranged in age from four to seventy; they included local schoolkids, visiting outdoor instructors, and white-collar workers on corporate retreats. Kambui presented the simulation to journalists and at conferences. Underground Railroad Reënactments began to mushroom across the United States. They took place in Niagara, where costumed Tubmans hustled groups to Canada across the Whirlpool Rapids Bridge, and at Y.M.C.A.s from Ohio to Alabama. At Conner Prairie, a living-history museum in Indiana, they became so convincing that credulous participants have physically attacked actors.

It's one of the marvels of America that an idea can begin with Malcolm X and land at Disney. In the early nineties, when the company's executives wanted an Underground Railroad attraction for a planned American-history theme park, they called Kambui. He rejected the idea, and the park itself was soon abandoned following outrage in the national press. William Styron—whose 1967 novel, "The Confessions of Nat Turner," once sparked its own slavery scandal—scoffed at Disney for believing that enslavement could be evoked through "virtual effects or virtual reality."

Yet more than one fugitive had tried to do just that. William Wells Brown, an author and a former fugitive who wrote that slavery was unrepresentable, also travelled with a slavery-themed moving panorama, the Oculus Rift of its era. So did Henry (Box) Brown. A minister described Brown's "Mirror of Slavery" as "admirably calculated to make an unfading impression upon the heart and memory, such as no lectures, books, or colloquial correspondence can produce, especially on the minds of children and young people." Kambui, too, wondered how to reach the millions who would never attend his reënactments.

In the early nineteen-nineties, Kambui met Rich Bergeron, a designer at the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium, a civic-minded software company best known for the computer game the Oregon Trail. A classroom cult classic, the program conveyed pioneer hardship through player frustration. Bergeron began to wonder if something similar could be done with fugitive escapes. He took a MECC team on one of Kambui's reënactments, and the eventual result was Freedom!, America's first computer game about slavery.

Beth Daniels was one of five programmers who worked on Freedom!, and, when I visited her home in Minneapolis, she showed me a computer older than I was: a squat, square Apple IIGS. The opening menu, framed by a pixel-art plantation tableau, appeared on the sixteen-color display. It was a surprisingly elegant image, evocative of Jacob Lawrence.

"Nowadays, we're used to talking about serious games," Daniels told me. "But that didn't exist in the nineties. We had no words for what we were creating."

Freedom!—which MECC billed as an educational simulation, not as a game—forced users to make their way across hostile territory without a map, uncertain whom they could trust, and dependent on clues like the North Star for orientation. Daniels is still proud of the "freedom font," which obscures place-names when the player-character cannot read. The first time I played, it took me seven tries and two hours to find freedom.

Kambui took an active advisory role in the program, and his influence is clear in the emphasis on wilderness survival. More fatefully, he pushed for period dialect and characters with a distinctly "African" look. The all-white team deferred to him.

In the fall of 1992, MECC shipped the simulation to one in every three school districts in the country. Controversy began building shortly thereafter. Minnesota's oldest black newspaper criticized characters' "exaggerated features" and "ignorant" speech ("I sees a runnin' look in yo' eyes," one says). The company announced plans for a dialect-free revision, but it was too late. Within months, Freedom! made national news following a high-profile protest at an Indiana school district; MECC recalled the product. "Slavery was not a game in our history," one parent declared. In January, 1993, the company instructed schools to return or destroy their copies.

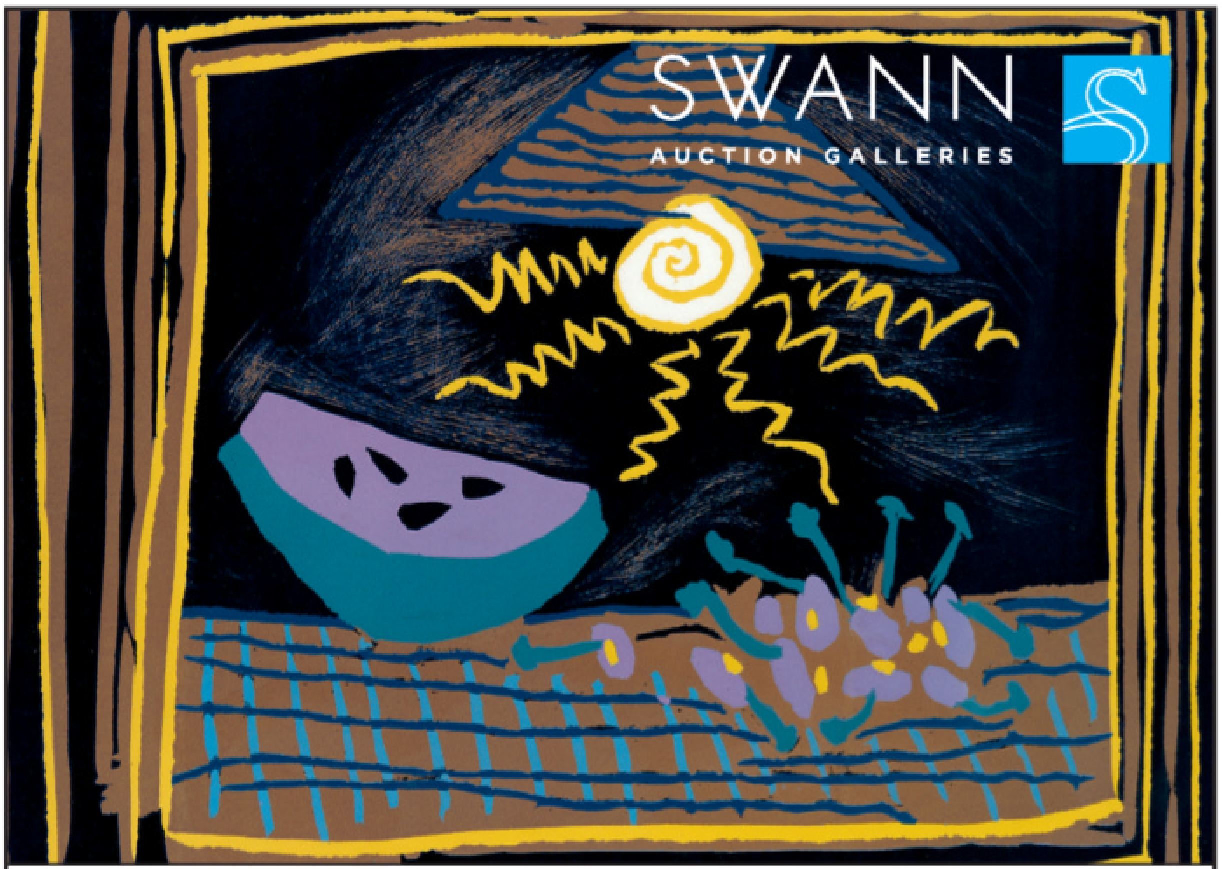
The prestige of games has since risen. In 2013, a mass-market adventure called Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry, which stars a ninja-like plantation liberator, won wide acclaim for grappling with enslavement. Meanwhile, Freedom! successors proliferate in schools and museums; Scholastic, National Geographic, and Cincinnati's Freedom Center all offer digital Underground Railroads. But, in a striking reversal, U.G.R.R.s, which had been gaining popularity in 1993, are now on the outs.

Among the reënactment narratives that participants have shared online, a common sentiment is incredulity. "Weird fever dream or did this happen???" a young woman wrote on Twitter, describing a "fucked up slavery LARP where all of us white children had to pretend to be slaves on a plantation."

Participants in other U.G.R.R.s report activities that began without warning, involved cages and screaming confrontations, or incorporated no discussion of race and American slavery. One teen told me about lying face down in wet grass for thirty minutes at Camp Joy, in Ohio, waiting to be "sold off." Counsellors yelled, told kids not to look them in the eyes, and substituted the words "pig" and "piggy" as racial slurs. (Camp Joy is run in partnership with the Cincinnati Police Department.) Complaints typically involve white adults "playing slavery" with black children, but the potential for trauma knows no color; in one local news broadcast, black reënactors at a Detroit church reduced several black fifth graders to sobs in an eldritch antebellum basement.

I don't remember my first U.G.R.R., but a childhood friend, who now works in education, told me that our third-grade class attended one at a camp in Pennsylvania. "You've probably repressed the memory," she said. Perhaps. Lena Dunham, however, remembers hers clearly. "What were we going to learn from being lashed together with our classmates and chased by a pony?" she wrote in her 2014 memoir. "Would we suddenly empathize, be able to fully imagine the experience of the American slave?"

Her skepticism was timely. A year



Pablo Picasso, *Nature morte à la pastèque* (detail), linoleum cut, 1962. Estimate $40,000 to $60,000.

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earlier, in 2013, the parents of a black student in Connecticut filed a human-rights complaint about a U.G.R.R. conducted by Nature's Classroom, which had incorporated the activity into outdoor retreats with hundreds of Northeastern middle and elementary schools. Their seventh-grade daughter described name-calling, make-believe cotton picking, and in-character threats to cut her Achilles tendon. “Scare the crap out of the group,” reads one official script from the organization, which also calls for mock slave auctions and pantomimed railroad-gang labor. Her parents denounced the simulation on national television, and called it “sanctioned social and emotional abuse.” Nature's Classroom suspended the program, though its director, John G. Santos, still defends it. (The organization “backed away for nothing but political reasons,” he told me, while conceding that the reënactment's age barrier should have been higher.)

In 2016, after a similar incident in Michigan, the Y.M.C.A. insisted that its affiliates stop running slavery simulations. By 2018, the Southern Poverty Law Center had declared them “inappropriate for any student.” A new consensus deemed U.G.R.R.s traumatic, trivializing, and, in the words of a former participant, “white culture.”

The Kambui Initiative has so far escaped the backlash. Harriet Tubman never lost a passenger; Chris Crutchfield has never been sued. Of the several dozen people I've accompanied on my three Minnesota U.G.R.R.s, nearly all responded positively. The simulation has a perfect safety record and a solid reputation, and regularly features in local celebrations of Juneteenth. Alanna Galloway, a thirty-five-year-old union organizer who plays Harriet Tubman, told me that she frequently meets former participants around the Twin Cities, where, years ago, almost every summer camp included a reënactment: “I'll be in Target and somebody will come up to me and say, ‘I remember you—you were Harriet Tubman on the Underground Railroad eight years ago.’”

For Galloway, who attended her first reënactment when she was twelve, U.G.R.R.s are a family tradition. Melvin Carter, Jr., is her father, and Melvin Carter III is her brother. Her husband is a longtime conductor; and her mother, a county official, is a former Tubman. The Kambui Education Initiative's connection to the black community is clearly a factor in the program's longevity. Although Crutchfield and Galloway agree that reënactments need black instructors, they reject racial requirements for participants, stressing that flight from oppression is a universal experience. “No matter what color we are, people went through swamps for us,” Crutchfield insists. “None of the black people who go through the program are slaves, either.”

For Crutchfield, what's ideally “an enhanced night hike” should never devolve into a drama or a game. The experience is “challenge by choice.” Nobody gets caught or is asked to simulate slave labor, and chasers are heard but never seen. In his view, a successful reënactment is a meditation on freedom and enslaved courage in the wilderness; it verges on prayer. “I'm a lawyer, I'm not a foo-foo sort of guy,” he said. “But I feel like we tap into the spirits of our ancestors when we're out in the woods.”

My own recent stint as a fugitive ended wholesomely enough. Emerging from the trail's most overgrown stretch, my companions and I were spurred into a final sprint by two gunshots. This time, it wasn't so alarming. Just ahead, our beaming conductors formed a circle around a man playing the djembe. “Freedom!” they cheered as we arrived in the clearing. We shouted it back in unison. A dazed giddiness reigned as the actors introduced themselves; “Lucretia Mott” struggled to light a fire. Crutchfield told us how far we'd gone (three-quarters of a mile), how long we'd been out (an hour and forty-five minutes), and how much more difficult it had been for Harriet Tubman.

In “Underground Railroad Game,” the brilliant Obie-winning satire written and performed by Jennifer Kidwell and Scott R. Sheppard, two teachers, one black and one white, run a U.G.R.R. in a middle-school auditorium. Full of cringey infantilizing enthusiasm, “Teacher Caroline” and “Teacher Stuart” address audience members as students, dividing them into Union and Confederate teams who compete to liberate or recapture slave dolls. Their cornball rapport turns erotic. It climaxes in a scene of full-on sadomasochistic race play, sparked by the teachers' horny outrage over a student's racist graffiti. As the teachers exorcise national demons with rulers and orgasm control, the Underground Railroad, with all its integrationist optimism, derails into an abyss of slapstick violence and id.

Few still believe in the curative vision of the Underground Railroad, but the enslaved experience has rarely been more central to appraisals of contemporary America. Writers of the Afropessimist school increasingly recast black life within the psychosocial parameters of slavery, as though the ice bath of bondage might awaken us from post-racial dreams. In Jeremy O. Harris's “Slave Play,” which débuted on Broadway in October, plantation life holds a mirror to the country's collective unconscious. Three frustrated interracial couples meet for “antebellum sexual performance therapy,” a form of bedroom role play. The first two acts are comic, but the play ends on a solemn, almost ceremonial note: a black woman must revisit the violence suffered by her ancestors before she and her white British husband can “lie with grace.”

The sacred and the profane can be difficult to disentangle. One overlooked dimension of slavery reënactment is its religious aura, from the stigmata of surrogate suffering to the pilgrim's desire to mark the passage of enslaved people through the landscape. At Ghana's Cape Coast Castle and Senegal's Gorée Island, visitors honor victims of the Middle Passage by stepping through Doors of No Return that frame the Atlantic. In Benin, a cycling route retraces the historic march from inland cities to the former slave port of Ouidah, where annual religious festivals draw visitors from across the African diaspora. Heritage tourism shades into ritual; for adherents of Brazilian Umbanda and Haitian vodou, embodying slavery can even constitute a form of worship, when spirits like Ogou Desalin—the deified form of the Haitian revolutionary Jean-Jacques Dessalines—possess devotees.

In this company, Kambui, with his sui-generis spiritualism and his Tubman reliquary, looks less like a crank and more like a postmodern missionary. His rites of reënactment may no longer fly in a nation disenchanted with empathy, wary of appropriation, and hypervigilant about trauma. Yet remembrance culture has only gained momentum. Reënacting slavery remains an irresistible means of reënvisioning freedom.

A couple of weeks after leaving Minnesota, I simulate a very different journey out of slavery. From runaway, I've graduated to rebel: the gun is no longer behind me but in my hands. I thrust it skyward, where birds and the occasional camera drone flit, to the rhythm of our chant: "Freedom or Death!" This is Slave Rebellion Reënactment, a two-day, twenty-four-mile re-creation of Louisiana's 1811 German Coast Uprising. Our leader is the artist Dread Scott, a fifty-five-year-old iconoclast who has burned money on Wall Street and once, as a student, sparked a nationwide free-speech scandal by exhibiting the American flag on a gallery floor. Now he has organized a reënactment of the largest slave insurrection in the history of the United States.

A small army is on the move toward New Orleans. Banners fly over a narrow column of muskets, machetes, horseback riders, and outstretched smartphones, winding down a bike path on the levee between the Mississippi and River Road. The reënactment may be a spectacle, but it's also a social experiment, the army's diversity mirroring a rebellion whose leaders came from Louisiana, West Africa, and the Caribbean. I meet an elderly civil-rights activist from North Carolina, a schoolteacher from LaPlace, journalists, artists, professors, and a small contingent from Louisiana's indigenous nations. I stay up late learning the history of Black American Sign Language from a young interpreter; the next day, marching beside her girlfriend, she signs our chants of "On to New Orleans" and "*Liberté!*"

For some, like Wanda Sabir, an Oakland-based journalist who begins our march with a ceremonial pouring of libations, the reënactment is a way of honoring the spirits of the enslaved. For others, like the aunt and uncle of Oscar Grant, an unarmed twenty-two-year-old who was killed by police at Oakland's Fruitvale Station in 2009, it's a way of connecting with previous generations of resistance. A few seem to be here simply for the novelty of the experience; one young woman, a New York City subway performer, tells jokes between landmarks.

My group follows a green flag appliquéd with the sword of Ogun, a spirit of West African origin venerated from Nigeria to Louisiana. We pass oil refineries, trailer parks, a steel mill, and a towering grain elevator funnelling rice into a cargo ship. In 1811, the surrounding land was blanketed with sugar plantations. The performance aims to demonstrate that the injustices of the present landscape—where poor communities have long waged battles against the polluters of "Cancer Alley"—are equally impermanent. Our chanting crescendoes as we approach Destrehan Plantation, where a tribunal of slaveholders sentenced several leaders of the uprising to death. It's now a tourist site and a wedding venue, thronged, on the day of our march, by visitors to an arts-and-crafts festival. Many of them stare. Reënactment can't change history, but it can alter the imaginary potential of a landscape.

The march ends in New Orleans's Congo Square, the Sunday gathering place where enslaved people once met to trade, worship, palaver, and create some of the first strains of African-American music. It now lies inside Louis Armstrong Park. Our column marches in under the broad archway, where a rebel with a bundle of burning sage wafts aromatic smoke. Jazz musicians play as four Mardi Gras Indians in sequinned, purple-feathered bodysuits revel among a crowd of hundreds. The party, though meticulously planned, feels like something we have conjured. Onstage, a band plays Janelle Monáe's protest song "Hell You Talmbout" while reënactors take turns chanting the names of the martyrs of 1811. A poet addresses the army as though we were not only ourselves but the ancestors incarnate. "You who have returned," she says. "We have found you again in places we would have never imagined." And, by the strange laws of simulation, it is almost true. ♦

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PROFILES

THE REALLY BIG PICTURE

Yuval Noah Harari, the author of "Sapiens," suggests that many of our political struggles barely matter.

BY IAN PARKER

In 2008, Yuval Noah Harari, a young historian at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, began to write a book derived from an undergraduate world-history class that he was teaching. Twenty lectures became twenty chapters. Harari, who had previously written about aspects of medieval and early-modern warfare—but whose intellectual appetite, since childhood, had been for all-encompassing accounts of the world—wrote in plain, short sentences that displayed no anxiety about the academic decorum of a study spanning hundreds of thousands of years. It was a history of everyone, ever. The book, published in Hebrew as "A Brief History of Humankind," became an Israeli best-seller; then, as "Sapiens," it became an international one. Readers were offered the vertiginous pleasure of acquiring apparent mastery of all human affairs—evolution, agriculture, economics—while watching their personal narratives, even their national narratives, shrink to a point of invisibility. President Barack Obama, speaking to CNN in 2016, compared the book to a visit he'd made to the pyramids of Giza.

"Sapiens" has sold more than twelve million copies. "Three important revolutions shaped the course of history," the book proposes. "The Cognitive Revolution kick-started history about 70,000 years ago. The Agricultural Revolution sped it up about 12,000 years ago. The Scientific Revolution, which got under way only 500 years ago, may well end history and start something completely different." Harari's account, though broadly chronological, is built out of assured generalization and comparison rather than dense historical detail. "Sapiens" feels like a study-guide summary of an immense, unwritten text—or, less congenially, like a ride on a tour bus that never stops for a poke around the ruins. ("As in Rome, so also in ancient China: most generals and philosophers did not think it their duty to develop new weapons.") Harari did not invent Big History, but he updated it with hints of self-help and futurology, as well as a high-altitude, almost nihilistic composure about human suffering. He attached the time frame of aeons to the time frame of punditry—of now, and soon. His narrative of flux, of revolution after revolution, ended urgently, and perhaps conveniently, with a cliffhanger. "Sapiens," while acknowledging that "history teaches us that what seems to be just around the corner may never materialise," suggests that our species is on the verge of a radical redesign. Thanks to advances in computing, cyborg engineering, and biological engineering, "we may be fast approaching a new singularity, when all the concepts that give meaning to our world—me, you, men, women, love and hate—will become irrelevant."

Harari, who is slim, soft-spoken, and relentless in his search for an audience, has spent the years since the publication of "Sapiens" in conversations about this cliffhanger. His two subsequent best-sellers—"Homo Deus" (2017) and "21 Lessons for the 21st Century" (2018)—focus on the present and the near future. Harari now defines himself as both a historian and a philosopher. He dwells particularly on the possibility that biometric monitoring, coupled with advanced computing, will give corporations and governments access to more complete data about people—about their desires and liabilities—than people have about themselves. A life under such scrutiny, he said recently, is liable to become "one long, stressing job interview."

If Harari weren't always out in public, one might mistake him for a recluse. He is shyly oracular. He spends part of almost every appearance denying that he is a guru. But, when speaking at conferences where C.E.O.s meet public intellectuals, or visiting Mark Zuckerberg's Palo Alto house, or the Élysée Palace, in Paris, he'll put a long finger to his chin and quietly answer questions about Neanderthals, self-driving cars, and the series finale of "Game of Thrones." Harari's publishing and speaking interests now occupy a staff of twelve, who work out of a sunny office in Tel Aviv, where an employee from Peru cooks everyone vegan lunches. Here, one can learn details of a scheduled graphic novel of "Sapiens"—a cartoon version of Harari, wearing wire-framed glasses and looking a little balder than in life, pops up here and there, across time and space. There are also plans for a "Sapiens" children's book, and a multi-season "Sapiens"-inspired TV drama, covering sixty thousand years, with a script by the co-writer of Mel Gibson's "Apocalypto."

Harari seldom goes to this office. He works at the home he shares with Itzik Yahav, his husband, who is also his agent and manager. They live in a village of expensive modern houses, half an hour inland from Tel Aviv, at a spot where Israel's coastal plain is first interrupted by hills. The location gives a view of half the country and, hazily, the Mediterranean beyond. Below the house are the ruins of the once mighty Canaanite city of Gezer; Harari and Yahav walk their dog there. Their swimming pool is blob-shaped and, at night, lit a vivid mauve.

At lunchtime one day in September, Yahav drove me to the house from Tel Aviv, in a Porsche S.U.V. with a rainbow-flag sticker on its windshield. "Yuval's unhappy with my choice of car," Yahav said, laughing. "He thinks it's unacceptable that a historian should have money." While Yahav drove, he had a

Harari, who is slim, soft-spoken, and relentless in his search for an audience, defines himself as both a historian and a philosopher.

PHOTOGRAPH BY OLAF BLECKER

few conversations with colleagues, on speakerphone, about the fittings for a new Harari headquarters, in a brutalist tower block above the Dizengoff Center mall. He said, "I can't tell you how much I need a P.A."—a personal assistant—"but I'm not an easy person." Asked to consider his husband's current place in world affairs, Yahav estimated that Harari was "between Madonna and Steven Pinker."

Harari and Yahav, both in their mid-forties, grew up near each other, but unknown to each other, in Kiryat Ata, an industrial town outside Haifa. (Yahav jokingly called it "the Israeli Chernobyl.") Yahav's background is less solidly middle class than his husband's. When the two men met, nearly twenty years ago, Harari had just finished his graduate studies, and Yahav teased him: "You've *never* worked? You've never had to pick up a plate for your living? I was a waiter from age fifteen!" He thought of Harari as a "genius geek." Yahav, who was then a producer in nonprofit theatre, is now known for making bold, and sometimes outlandish, demands on behalf of his husband. "Because I have only one author, I can go crazy," he had told me. In the car, he noted that he had declined an invitation to have Harari participate in the World Economic Forum, at Davos, in 2017, because the proposed panels were "not good enough." A year later, when Harari was offered the main stage, in a slot between Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron, Yahav accepted. His recollections of such negotiations are delivered with self-mocking charm and a low, conspiratorial laugh. He likes to say, "You don't understand—Yuval works for *me!*"

We left the highway and drove into the village. He said of Harari, "When I meet my friends, he's usually not invited, because my friends are crazy and loud. It's too much for him. He shuts down." When planning receptions and dinners for Harari, Yahav follows a firm rule: "Not more than eight people."

For more than a decade, Harari has spent several weeks each year on a silent-meditation retreat, usually in India. At home, he starts his day with an hour of meditation; in the summer, he also swims for half an hour while listening to nonfiction audiobooks aimed at the general reader. (Around the time of my visit, he was listening to a history of the Cuban Revolution, and to a study of the culture of software engineering.) He swims the breaststroke, wearing a mask, a snorkel, and "bone conduction" headphones that press against his temples, bypassing the ears.

When Yahav and I arrived at the house, Harari was working at the kitchen table, reading news stories from Ukraine, printed for him by an assistant. He had an upcoming speaking engagement in Kyiv, at an oligarch-funded conference. He was also planning a visit to the United Arab Emirates, which required some delicacy—the country has no diplomatic ties with Israel.

The house was open and airy, and featured a piano. (Yahav plays.) Harari was wearing shorts and Velcro-fastened sandals, and, as Yahav fondly observed, his swimming headphones had left imprints on his head. Harari explained to me that the device "beams sound into the skull." Later, with my encouragement, he put on his cyborgian getup, including the snorkel, and laughed as I took a photograph, saying, "Just don't put that in the paper, because Itzik will kill both me and you."

Unusually for a public intellectual, Harari has drawn up a mission statement. It's pinned on a bulletin board in the Tel Aviv office, and begins, "Keep your eyes on the ball. Focus on the main global problems facing humanity." It also says, "Learn to distinguish reality from illusion," and "Care about suffering." The statement used to include "Embrace ambiguity." This was cut, according to one of Harari's colleagues, because it was too ambiguous.

One recent afternoon, Naama Avital, the operation's C.E.O., and Naama Wartenburg, Harari's chief marketing officer, were sitting with Yahav, wondering if Harari would accept a hypothetical invitation to appear on a panel with President Donald Trump.

"I think that whenever Yuval is free to say exactly what he thinks, then it's O.K.," Avital said.

Yahav, surprised, said that he could perhaps imagine a private meeting, "but to film it—to film Yuval with Trump?"

"You'd have a captive audience," Wartenburg said.

Avital agreed, noting, "There's a politician, but then there are his supporters—and you're talking about tens of millions of people."

"A panel with *Trump*?" Yahav asked. He later said that he had never accepted any speaking invitations from Israeli settlers in the West Bank, adding that Harari, although not a supporter of settlements, might have been inclined to say yes.

Harari has acquired a large audience in a short time, and—like the Silicon Valley leaders who admire his work—he can seem uncertain about what to do with his influence. Last summer, he was criticized when readers noticed that the Russian translation of "21 Lessons for the 21st Century" had been edited to make it more palatable to Vladimir Putin's government. Harari had approved some of these edits, and had replaced a discussion of Russian misinformation about its 2014 annexation of Crimea with a passage about false statements made by President Trump.

Harari's office is still largely a boutique agency serving the writing and speaking interests of one client. But, last fall, it began to brand part of its work under the heading of "Sapienship." The office remains a for-profit enterprise, but it has taken on some of the ambitions and attributes of a think tank, or the foundation of a high-minded industrialist. Sapienship's activities are driven by what Harari's colleagues call his "vision." Avital explained that some projects she was working on, such as "Sapiens"-related school workshops, didn't rely on "everyday contact with Yuval."

Harari's vision takes the form of a list. "That's something I have from students," he told me. "They like short lists." His proposition, often repeated, is that humanity faces three primary threats: nuclear war, ecological collapse, and technological disruption. Other issues that politicians commonly talk about—terrorism, migration, inequality, poverty—are lesser worries, if not distractions. In part because there's little disagreement, at least in a Harari audience, about the seriousness of the nuclear and climate threats, and about how to respond to them, Harari highlights the technological one. Last September, while appearing onstage with Reuven Rivlin, Israel's President, at an "influencers' summit" in Tel Aviv, Harari said, in

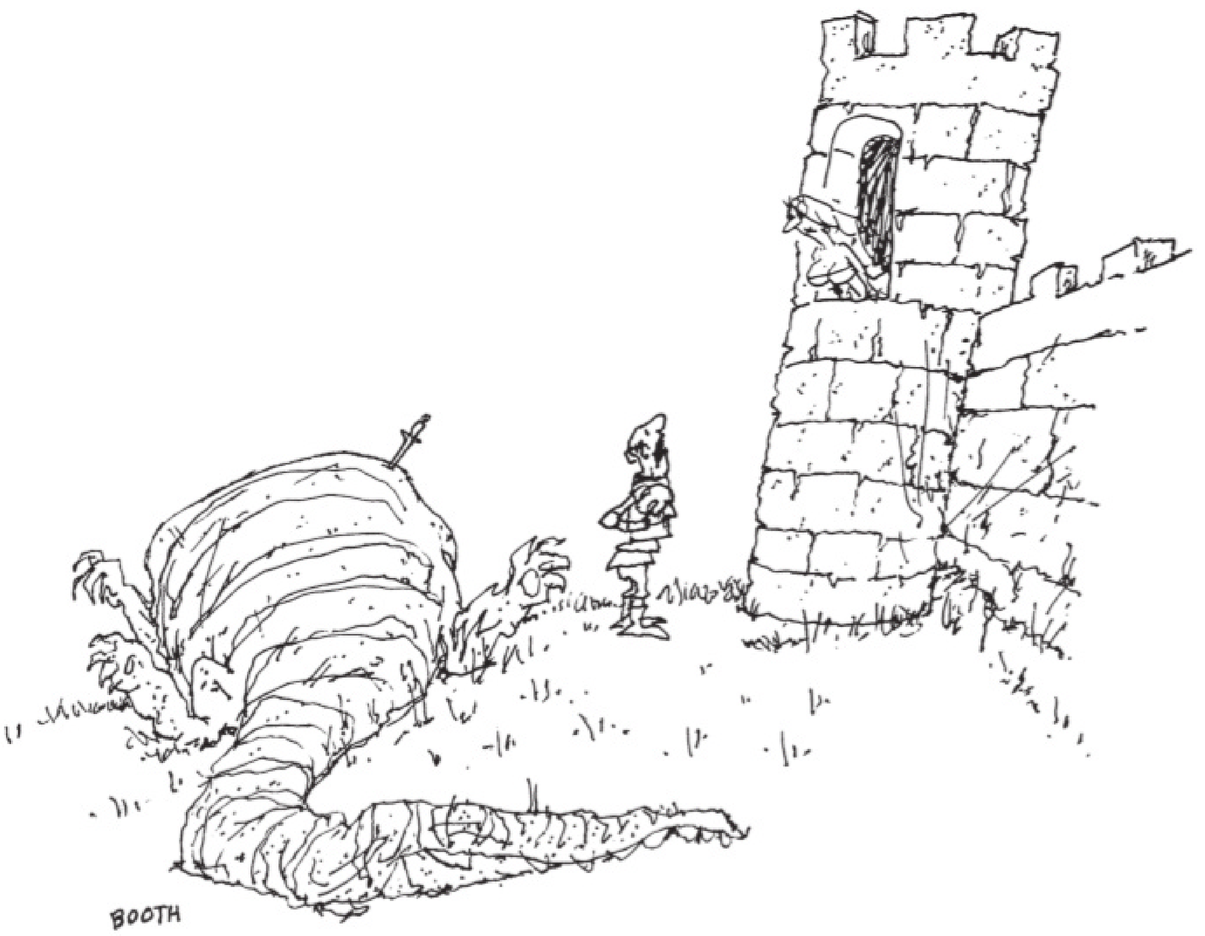
Hebrew, “Think about a situation where somebody in Beijing or San Francisco knows what every citizen in Israel is doing at every moment—all the most intimate details about every mayor, member of the Knesset, and officer in the Army, from the age of zero.” He added, “Those who will control the world in the twenty-first century are those who will control data.”

He also said that *Homo sapiens* would likely disappear, in a tech-driven upgrade. Harari often disputes the notion that he makes prophecies or predictions—indeed, he has claimed to do “the opposite”—but a prediction acknowledging uncertainty is still a prediction. Talking to Rivlin, Harari said, “In two hundred years, I can pretty much assure you that there will not be any more Israelis, and no *Homo sapiens*—there will be something else.”

“What a world,” Rivlin said. The event ended in a hug.

Afterward, Harari said of Rivlin, “He took my message to be kind of pessimistic.” Although the two men had largely spoken past each other, they were in some ways aligned. An Israeli President is a national figurehead, standing above the political fray. Harari claims a similar space. He speaks of looming mayhem but makes no proposals beyond urging international coöperation, and “focus.” A parody of Harari’s writing, in the British magazine *Private Eye*, included streams of questions: “What does the rise of Donald Trump signify? If you are in a falling lift, will it do any good to jump up and down like crazy? Why is liberal democracy in crisis? What is the state capital of Wyoming?”

This tentativeness at first seems odd. Harari has the ear of decision-makers; he travels the world to show them PowerPoint slides depicting mountains of trash and unemployed hordes. But, like a fiery street preacher unable to recommend one faith over another, he concludes with a policy shrug. Harari emphasizes that the public should press politicians to respond to tech threats, but when I asked what that response should be he said, “I don’t know what the answer is. I don’t think it will come from me. Even if I took three years off, and just immersed myself in some cave of books and meditation, I don’t think I would emerge with the answer.”



“I was hoping you’d consider this a prelude to a kiss.”

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Harari’s reluctance to support particular political actions can be understood, in part, as instinctual conservatism and brand protection. According to “Sapiens,” progress is basically an illusion; the Agricultural Revolution was “history’s biggest fraud,” and liberal humanism is a religion no more founded on reality than any other. Harari writes, “The Sapiens regime on earth has so far produced little that we can be proud of.” In such a context, any specific policy idea is likely to seem paltry, and certainly too quotidian for a keynote speech. A policy might also turn out to be a mistake. “We are very careful, the entire team, about endorsing anything, any petition,” Harari told me.

Harari has given talks at Google and Instagram. Last spring, on a visit to California, he had dinner with, among others, Jack Dorsey, Twitter’s co-founder and C.E.O., and Chris Cox, the former chief product officer at Facebook. It’s not hard to understand Harari’s appeal to Silicon Valley executives, who would prefer to cast a furrowed gaze toward the distant future than to rewrite their privacy policies or their algorithms. (Zuckerberg rarely responds to questions about the malign influence of Facebook without speaking of his “focus” on this or that.) Harari said of tech entrepreneurs, “I don’t try intentionally to be a threat to them. I think that much of what they’re doing is also good. I think there are many things to be said for working with them as long as it’s possible, instead of viewing them as the enemy.” Harari believes that some of the social ills caused by a company like Facebook should be understood as bugs—“and, as good engineers, they are trying to fix the bugs.” Earlier, Itzik Yahav had said that he felt no unease about “visiting Mark Zuckerberg at his home, with Priscilla, and Beast, the dog,” adding, “I don’t think Mark is an evil person. And Yuval is bringing questions.”

Harari’s policy agnosticism is also connected to his focus on focus itself. The aspect of a technological dystopia that most preoccupies him—losing mental autonomy to A.I.—can be at least partly countered, in his view, by citizens cultivating greater mindfulness. He collects examples of A.I. threats. He refers, for instance, to recent research suggesting that it’s possible to measure people’s blood pressure by processing video of their faces. A government that can see your blood boiling during a leader’s speech can identify you as a dissident. Similarly, Harari has observed that, had sophisticated artificial intelligence existed when he was younger, it might have recognized his homosexuality long before he was ready to acknowledge it. Such data-driven judgments don't need to be perfectly accurate to outperform humans. Harari argues that, though there's no sure prophylactic against such future intrusions, people who are alert to the workings of their minds will be better able to protect themselves. Harari recently told a Ukrainian reporter, "Freedom depends to a large extent on how much you know yourself, and you need to know yourself better than, say, the government or the corporations that try to manipulate you." In this context, to think clearly—to snorkel in the pool, back and forth—is a form of social action.

Naama Avital, in the Tel Aviv office, told me that, on social media, fans of Harari's books tend to be "largely male, twenty-five to thirty-five." Bill Gates is a Harari enthusiast, but the more typical reader may be a young person grateful for permission to pay more attention to his or her needs than to the needs of others. (Not long ago, one of Harari's YouTube admirers commented, "Your books changed my life, Yuval. Just as investing in Tesla did.")

Harari doesn't dismiss more active forms of political engagement, particularly in the realm of L.G.B.T.Q. rights, but his writing underscores the importance of equanimity. In a section of "Sapiens" titled "Know Thyself," Harari describes how the serenity achieved through meditation can be "so profound that those who spend their lives in the frenzied pursuit of pleasant feelings can hardly imagine it." "21 Lessons" includes extended commentary on the life of the Buddha, who "taught that the three basic realities of the universe are that everything is constantly changing, nothing has any enduring essence, and nothing is completely satisfying." Harari continues, "You can explore the furthest reaches of the galaxy, of your body, or of your mind, but you will never encounter something that does not change, that has an eternal essence, and that completely satisfies you. . . . 'What should I do?' ask people, and the Buddha advises, 'Do nothing. Absolutely nothing.'"

Harari didn't learn the result of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election until five weeks after the vote. He was on a retreat, in England. In Vipassana meditation, the form that Harari practices, a retreat lasts at least ten days. He sometimes does ten-day retreats in Israel, in the role of a teaching assistant. Once a year, he goes away for a month or longer. Participants at a Vipassana center may talk to one another as they arrive—while giving up their phones and books—but thereafter they're expected to be silent, even while eating with others.

I discussed meditation with Harari one day at a restaurant in a Tel Aviv hotel. (A young doorman recognized him and thanked him for his writing.) We were joined by Itzik Yahav and the mothers of both men. Jeanette Yahav, an accountant, has sometimes worked in the Tel Aviv office. So, too, has Pnina Harari, a former office administrator; she has had the task of responding to the e-mail pouring into Harari's Web site: poems, pieces of music, arguments for the existence of God.

Harari said of the India retreats, which take place northeast of Mumbai, "Most of the day you're in your own cell, the size of this table."

"Unbelievable," Pnina Harari said.

During her son's absences, she and Yahav stay in touch. "We speak, we console each other," she said. She also starts a journal: "It's like a letter to Yuval. And the last day of the meditation I send it to him." Once back in Mumbai, he can open an e-mail containing two months of his mother's news.

Before Itzik Yahav met Harari, through a dating site, he had some experience of Vipassana, and for years they practiced together. Yahav has now stopped. "I couldn't keep up," he told me. "And you're not allowed to drink. I want to drink with friends, a glass of wine." I later spoke to Yoram Yovell, a friend of Harari's, who is a well-known Israeli neuroscientist and TV host. A few years ago, Yovell signed up for a ten-day retreat in India. He recalled telling himself, "This is the first time in ten years that you're having a ten-day vacation, and you're spending it sitting on your tush, on this little mat, inhaling and exhaling. And outside is *India!*" He lasted twenty-four hours. (In 2018, two years after authorities in Myanmar began a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Rohingya Muslims, Jack Dorsey completed a ten-day Vipassana retreat in that country, and defended his visit by saying, "This was a purely personal trip for me focused on only one dimension: meditation.")

At lunch, Pnina Harari recalled the moment when Yuval's two older sisters reported to her that Yuval had taught himself to read: "He was three, not more than four."

Yuval smiled. "I think more like four, five."

She described the time he wrote a school essay, then rewrote it to make it less sophisticated. He told her that nobody would have understood the first draft.

From the age of eight, Harari attended a school for bright students, two bus rides away from his family's house in Kiryat Ata. Yuval's father, who died in 2010, was born on a kibbutz, and maintained a lifelong skepticism about socialism; his work, as a state-employed armaments engineer, was classified. By the standards of the town, the Harari household was bourgeois and bookish.

The young Yuval had a taste for grand designs. He has said, "I promised myself that when I grew up I would not get bogged down in the mundane troubles of daily life, but would do my best to understand the big picture." In the back yard, he spent months digging a very deep hole; it was never filled in, and sometimes became a pond. He built, out of wood blocks and Formica tiles, a huge map of Europe, on which he played war games of his own invention. Harari told me that during his adolescence, against the backdrop of the first intifada, he went through a period when he was "a kind of stereotypical right-wing nationalist." He recalled his mind-set: "Israel as a nation is the most important thing in the world. And, obviously, we are right about everything. And the whole world doesn't understand us and hates us. So we have to be strong and defend ourselves." He laughed. "You know—the usual stuff."

He deferred his compulsory military service, through a program for high-achieving students. (The service was never completed, because of an undisclosed health problem. "It wasn't something catastrophic," he said. "I'm still here.") When he began college, at Hebrew University, he was younger than his peers, and he had not shared the experience of three years of activity often involving groups larger than eight. By then, Harari's nationalist fire had dimmed. In its place, he had attempted to will himself into religious conviction—and an observant Jewish life. "I was very keen to believe," he said. He supposed, wrongly, that "if I read enough, or think about it enough, or talk to the right people, then something will click."

In Chapter 2 of "Sapiens," Harari describes how, about seventy thousand years ago, *Homo sapiens* began to develop nuanced language, and thereby began to dominate other *Homo* species, and the world. Harari's discussion reflects standard scholarly arguments, but he adds this gloss: during what he calls the Cognitive Revolution, *Homo sapiens* became uniquely able to communicate untruths. "As far as we know, only Sapiens can talk about entire kinds of entities that they have never seen, touched or smelled," he writes, referring to myths and gods. "Many animals and human species could previously say 'Careful! A lion!' Thanks to the Cognitive Revolution, *Homo sapiens* acquired the ability to say, 'The lion is the guardian spirit of our tribe.'" This mental leap enabled coöperation among strangers: "Two Catholics who have never met can nevertheless go together on crusade or pool funds to build a hospital because they both believe that God was incarnated in human flesh and allowed Himself to be crucified to redeem our sins."

In the schema of "Sapiens," money is a "fiction," as are corporations and nations. Harari uses "fiction" where another might say "social construct." (He explained to me, "I would almost always go for the day-to-day word, even if the nuance of the professional word is a bit more accurate.") Harari further proposes that fictions require *believers*, and exert power only as long as a "communal belief" in them persists. Every social construct, then, is a kind of religion: a declaration of universal human rights is not a manifesto, or a program, but the expression of a benign delusion; an activity like using money, or obeying a stoplight, is a collective fantasy, not a ritual. When I asked him if he really meant this, he laughed, and said, "It's like the weak force in physics—which is weak, but still strong enough to hold the entire universe together!" (In fact, the weak force is responsible for the disintegration of subatomic particles.) "It's the same with these fictions—they are strong enough to hold millions of people together."

In his representation of how people function in society, Harari sometimes seems to be extrapolating from his personal history—from his eagerness to believe in something. When I called him a "seeker," he gave amused, half-grudging assent.

As an undergraduate, Harari wrote a paper, for a medieval-history class, that was later published, precociously, in a peer-reviewed journal. "The Military Role of the Frankish Turcopoles: A Reassessment" challenged the previously held assumption that, in crusader armies, most cavalrymen were heavily armored. Harari proposed, in an argument derived from careful reading of sources across several centuries, that many were light cavalrymen. Benjamin Kedar, who taught the class, told me that the paper "was absolutely original, and really a breakthrough." It seems to be generally agreed that, had Harari stuck solely to military history of this era, he would have become a significant figure in the field. Idan Sherer, a former student and research assistant of Harari's who now teaches at Ben Gurion University, said, "I don't think *the* prominent scholar, but definitely one of them."

In academic prose, especially philosophy, Harari seems to have found something analogous to what he had sought in nation and in faith. "I had respect for, and belief in, very dense writing," he recalled. "One of the first things I did when I came out, to myself, as gay—I went to the university library and took out all these books about queer theory, which were some of the densest things I've ever read." He jokingly added, "It almost converted me back. It was 'O.K., now you're gay, so you need to be *very serious* about it.'"

In 1998, he began working toward a doctorate in history, at the University of Oxford. "He was oppressed by the grayness," Harari's mother recalled, at lunch. Harari agreed: "It wasn't the greatest time

"He's always been a little needy, but the despair is new."

of my life. It was a culture shock, it was a climate shock. I just couldn’t grasp it could be weeks and weeks and you never see the sun.” He later added, “It was a personal impasse. I’d hoped that, by studying and researching, I would understand not only the world but my life.” He went on, “All the books I’d been reading and all the philosophical discussions—not only did they not provide an answer, it seemed extremely unlikely that any answer would ever come out of this.” He told himself, “There is something fundamentally wrong in the way that I’m approaching this whole thing.”

ELVIS WEEK

We go to Graceland for the vigil, Hope in the same fuchsia tube dress
she wore to our uncle’s funeral, but it’s O.K. this time around, no-
body hissing about what’s appropriate, not in Memphis in August,
99 at dusk, the dew point making people’s hair deranged. We clutch
our little candles from their cardboard cuffs, and mine keeps going
out, Hope leaning over to help relight it. There are as many Elvises
as Elvis fans, old and not so old and from the farthest reaches, roll-
ing strollers, luggage, oxygen tanks; so many stick-on sideburns; so
many ways to sweat. I don’t know it yet, but Hope’s blurred out on
pills again. We both buy buttons with the lightning logo: Taking Care
of Business in a Flash. One too-tall Elvis strums a ukulele, strolling
up and down the line along the gates and nodding solemnly, the crowd
just slightly hushed. Hope says, *Can you imagine being loved this much*?

—*Caki Wilkinson*

One reason he chose to study outside Israel was to “start life anew,” as a gay man. On weekends, he went to London night clubs. (“I think I tried Ecstasy a few times,” he said.) And he made dates online. He set himself the target of having sex with at least one new partner a week, “to make up for lost time, and also understand how it works—because I was very shy.” He laughed. “Very strong discipline!” He treated each encounter as a credit in a ledger, “so if one week I had two, and then the next week there was none, I’m O.K.”

These recollections contain no regret, but, Harari said, “coming out was a kind of false enlightenment.” He explained, “I’d had this feeling—*this is it*. There was one big piece of the puzzle that I was missing, and this is why my life was completely fucked up.” Instead, he felt “even more miserable.”

On a dating site, Harari met Ron Merom, an Israeli software engineer. As Merom recently recalled, they began an intense e-mail correspondence “about the meaning of life, and all that.” They became friends. (In 2015, when “Sapiens” was first published in English, Merom was working for Google in California, and helped arrange for Harari to give an “Authors at Google” talk, which was posted online—an important early moment of exposure.) Merom, who now works at Facebook, has forgotten the details of their youthful exchanges, but can recall their flavor: Harari’s personal philosophy at the time was complex and dark, “even a bit violent or aggressive”—and this included his discussion of sexual relationships. As Merom put it, “It was ‘I need to conquer the world—either you win or you lose.’ ”

Merom had just begun going on meditation retreats. He told Harari, “It sounds like you’re looking for something, and Vipassana might be it.” In 2000, when Harari was midway through his thesis—a study of how Renaissance military memoirists described their experiences of war—he took a bus to a meditation center in the West of England.

Ten days later, Harari wrote to Amir Fink, a friend in Israel. Fink, who now works as an environmentalist, told me that Harari had quoted, giddily, the theme song of a “Pinocchio” TV show once beloved in Israel: “Good morning, world! I’m now freed from my strings. I’m a real boy.”

At the retreat, Harari was told that he should do nothing but notice his breath, in and out, and notice whenever his mind wandered. This, Harari has written, “was the most important thing anybody had ever told me.”

Steven Gunn, an Oxford historian and Harari’s doctoral adviser, recently recalled the moment: “I sort of did my best supervisorial thing. ‘Are you *sure* you’re not getting mixed up in a cult?’ So far as I could tell, he wasn’t being drawn into anything he didn’t want to be drawn into.”

On a drive with Yahav and Harari from their home to Jerusalem, I asked if it was fair to think of “Sapiens” as an attempt to transmit Buddhist principles, not just through its references to meditation—and to the possibility of finding serenity in self-knowledge—but through its narrative shape. The story of “Sapiens” echoes the Buddha’s “basic realities”: constant change; no enduring essence; the inevitability of suffering.

“Yes, to some extent,” Harari said. “It’s definitely not a conscious project. It’s not ‘O.K.! Now I believe in these three principles, and now I need to convince the world, but I can’t state it directly, because this would be a missionary thing.’ ” Rather, he said, the experience of meditation “imbues your entire thinking.”

He added, “I definitely don’t think that the solution to all the world’s problems is to convert everybody to Buddhism, or to have everybody meditating. I meditate, I know how difficult it is. There’s no chance you can get eight billion people to meditate, and, even if they try, in many cases it could backfire in a terrible way. It’s very easy to become self-absorbed, to become megalomaniacal.” He referred to Ashin Wirathu, an ultranationalist Buddhist monk in Myanmar, who has incited violence against Rohingya Muslims.

In “Sapiens,” Harari went on, part of the task had been “to show how everything is impermanent, and what we think of as eternal social structures—even family, money, religion, nations—everything is changing, nothing is eternal, everything came out of some historical process.” These were Buddhist thoughts, he said, but they were easy enough to access without Buddhism. “Maybe *biology* is permanent, but in society nothing is permanent,” he said. “There’s no essence, no essence to any nation. You don't need to meditate for two hours a day to realize that."

We drove to Hebrew University, which is atop Mt. Scopus. We walked into the humanities building, and, through an emergency exit, onto a rooftop. There was a panoramic view of the Old City and the Temple Mount. Harari recalled his return to the university, from Oxford, in 2001, during the second intifada. The university is surrounded by Arab neighborhoods that he's never visited. In the car, he had been talking about current conditions in Israel; in recent years, he had said, "many, if not most, Israelis simply lost the motivation to solve the conflict, especially because Israel has managed to control it so efficiently." Harari told me that, as a historian, he had to dispute the assumption that an occupation can't last "for decades, for centuries"—it can, and new surveillance technologies can enable oppression "with almost no killing." Harari saw no alternative other than "to wait for history to work its magic—a war, a catastrophe." With a dry laugh, he said, "Israel, Hezbollah, Hamas, Iran—a couple of thousand people die, *something*. This can break the mental deadlock."

Harari recalled a moment, in 2015, when he and Yahav had accidentally violated the eight-person rule. They had gone to a dinner that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was expected to attend. Netanyahu was known to have read "Sapiens." "We were told it would be very intimate," Harari said. There were forty guests. Harari shared a few pleasantries with Netanyahu, but they had "no real exchange at all."

Yahav interjected to suggest that, because of "Sapiens," Netanyahu "started doing Meatless Monday." Harari, who, like Yahav, largely avoids eating animal products, writes in "Sapiens" that "modern industrial agriculture might well be the greatest crime in history." When Netanyahu announced a commitment "to fight cruelty toward animals," friends encouraged Harari to take a little credit.

"People told me this was my greatest achievement," Harari said. "I managed to convince Netanyahu of something! It didn't matter what." This assessment gives some indication of Harari's local politics, but Yoram Yovell, his TV-presenter friend, said that he had tried and failed to persuade Harari to speak against Netanyahu publicly. Yovell said that Harari, although "vehemently against Netanyahu," seemed to resist "jumping into the essence of life—the blood and guts of life," adding, "I actually am disappointed with it." Harari, who has declined invitations to write a regular column in the Israeli press, told me, "I could start making speeches, and writing, 'Vote for this party,' and maybe, one time, I can convince a couple of thousand people to change their vote. But then I will kind of expend my entire credit on this. I'll be identified with one party, one camp." He did acknowledge that he was discouraged by the choice presented by the September general election, which was then imminent: "It's either a right-wing government or an extreme-right-wing government. There is no other serious option."

At Hebrew University, his role is somewhat rarefied: he has negotiated his way to having no faculty responsibilities beyond teaching; he currently advises no Ph.D. students. (He said of his professional life, "I write the books and give talks. Itzik is doing basically everything else.") Harari teaches one semester a year, fitting three classes into one day a week. His recent courses include a history of relations between humans and animals—the subject of a future Harari book, perhaps—and another called History for the Masses, on writing for a general reader. During our visit to the university, he took me to an empty lecture hall with steeply raked seating. "This is where 'Sapiens' originated," he said. He noted, with mock affront, that the room attracts stray cats: "They come into class, and they grab all the attention. 'A cat! Oh!'"

"It's hard to keep a good friendship when someone's financial status changes," Amir Fink told me. Fink and his husband, a musicologist, have known Harari since college. "We have tried to keep his success out of it. As two couples, we meet a lot, we take vacations abroad together." (Neither couple has children.) Fink went on, "We love to come to their place for the weekend." They play board games, such as Settlers of Catan, and "whist—Israeli Army whist."

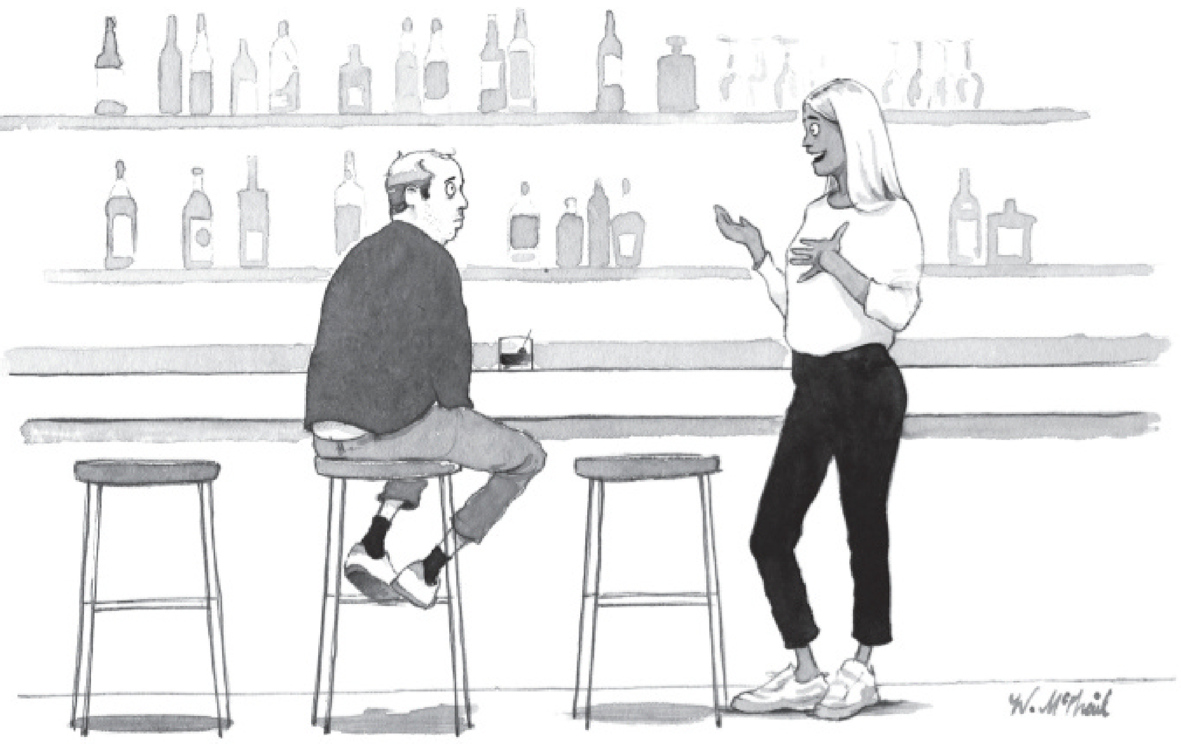
Fink spoke of the scale of the operation built by Harari and Yahav. "I hope it's sustainable," he said. With "Sapiens," he went on, Harari had written "a book that summarizes the world." The books that followed were bound to be "more specific, and more political." That is, they drew Harari away from his natural intellectual territory. "Homo Deus" derived directly from Harari's teaching, but "21 Lessons," Fink said, "is basically a collection of articles and responses to the present day." He added, "It's very hard for Yuval to keep himself as a teacher," noting, "He becomes, I guess, what the French would call a *philosophe*."

While Harari was at Oxford, he read Jared Diamond's 1997 book, "Guns, Germs, and Steel," and was dazzled by its reach, across time and place. "It was a complete life-changer," Harari said. "You could actually *write* such books!" Steven Gunn, Harari's Oxford adviser, told me that, as Harari worked on his thesis, he had to be discouraged from taking too broad a historical view: "I have memories of numerous revision meetings where I'd say, 'Well, all this stuff about people flying helicopters in Vietnam is very interesting, and I can see why you need to read it, and think about it, to write about why people wrote the way they did about battles in Italy in the sixteenth century, but, actually, the thesis has to be nearly all about battles in Italy in the sixteenth century.'"

After Harari received his doctorate, he returned to Jerusalem with the idea of writing a history of the gay experience in Israel. He met with Benjamin Kedar. Kedar recently said, "I gave him a hard look—'Yuval, do it *after* you get tenure.'"

Harari, taking this advice, stuck with his specialty. But his continued interest in comparative history was evident in the 2007 book "Special Operations in the Age of Chivalry, 1100-1550," whose anachronistic framing provoked some academic reviewers. And the following year, in "The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000," Harari was at last able to include an extended discussion of Vietnam War memoirs.

In 2003, Hebrew University initiated an undergraduate course, An Introduction to the History of the World. Such classes had begun appearing in a few history departments in the previous decade; traditional historians, Kedar said,



"Paul? Susan! From the gym? I showed you how to use the elliptical? We went for coffee? One thing led to another? We started dating? Then we got married? We had two kids? But we got divorced? I got custody? You see them on the weekends? But you want them for Christmas? I said no way? You called me last night in tears? Susan!"

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were often disapproving, and still are: "They say, 'You teach the French Revolution, and if somebody looks out of the window they miss the revolution'—all those jokes." Gunn said that "Oxford makes sure people study a wide range of history, but it does it by making sure that people study a wide range of different detailed things, rather than one course that goes right across everything."

Harari agreed to teach the world-history course, as well as one on war in the Middle Ages. He had always hated speaking to people he didn't know. He told me that, as a younger man, "if I had to call the municipality to arrange some bureaucratic stuff, I would sit for like ten minutes by the telephone, just bringing up the courage." (One can imagine his bliss in the dining hall at a meditation retreat—the sound of a hundred people not starting a conversation.) Even today, Harari is an unassuming lecturer: conferences sometimes give him a prizefighter's introduction, with lights and music, at the end of which he comes warily to the podium, says, "Hello, everyone," and sets up his laptop. Yahav described watching Harari recently freeze in front of an audience of thousands in Beijing. "I was, 'Start *moving!*'"

As an uncomfortable young professor, Harari tended to write out his world-history lectures as a script. At one point, as part of an effort to encourage his students to listen to his words, rather than transcribe them, he began handing out copies of his notes. "They started circulating, even among students who were not in my class," Harari recalled. "That's when I thought, Ah, maybe there's a book in it." He imagined that a few students at other universities would buy the book, and perhaps "a couple of history buffs."

This origin explains some of the qualities that distinguish "Sapiens." Unlike many other nonfiction blockbusters, it isn't full of catchy neologisms or cinematic scene-setting; its impact derives from a steady management of ideas, in prose that has the unhedged authority—and sometimes the inelegance—of a professor who knows how to make one or two things stick. ("An empire is a political order with two important characteristics . . .") "Guns, Germs, and Steel" begins with a conversation between Jared Diamond and a Papua New Guinean politician; in "Sapiens," Harari does not figure in the narrative. He told me, "Maybe it is some legacy of my study of memoirs and autobiographies. I know how dangerous it is to make personal experience your main basis for authority."

It still astonishes Harari that readers became so excited about the early pages of "Sapiens," which describe the coexistence of various *Homo* species. "I thought, This is so banal!" he told me. "There is absolutely nothing there that is new. I'm not an archeologist. I'm not a primatologist. I mean, I did *zero* new research. . . . It was really reading the kind of common knowledge and just presenting it in a new way."

The Israeli edition, "A Brief History of Humankind," was published in June, 2011. Yoram Yovell recalled that "Yuval became beloved very quickly," and was soon a regular guest on Israeli television. "It was beautiful to see the way he handled it," Yovell added. "He's intellectually self-confident but truly modest." The book initially failed to attract foreign publishers. Harari and Yahav marketed a print-on-demand English-language edition, on Amazon; this was Harari's own translation, and it included his Gmail address on the title page, and illustrations by Yahav. It sold fewer than two thousand copies. In 2013, Yahav persuaded Deborah Harris, an Israeli literary agent whose clients include David Grossman and Tom Segev, to take on the book. She proposed edits and recommended hiring a translator. Harris recently recalled that, in the U.K., an auction of the revised manuscript began with twenty-two publishers, "and it went on and on and on," whereas, in the U.S., "I was getting the most insulting rejections, of the kind 'Who does this man think he is?'" Harvill Secker, Harari's British publisher, paid significantly more for the book than HarperCollins did in the U.S.

Harari and Yahav recently visited Harris at her house, in Jerusalem; it also serves as her office. They had promised to cart away copies of "Sapiens"—in French, Portuguese, and Malay—that were filling up her garden shed. At her dining table, Harris recalled seeing "Sapiens" take off: "The reviews were extraordinary. And then Obama. And Gates." (Gates, on his blog: "I've always been a fan of writers who try to connect the dots.") Harris began spotting the book in airports; "Sapiens," she said, was reaching people who read only one book a year.

There was a little carping from reviewers—"Mr. Harari's claim that Columbus ignited the scientific revolution is surprising," a reviewer in the *Wall Street Journal* wrote—but the book thrived in an environment of relative critical neglect. At the time of its publication, "Sapiens" was not reviewed in the *Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, or the Washington *Post.* Steven Gunn supposes that Harari, by working on a far greater time scale than the great historical popularizers of the twentieth century, like Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler, substantially protected himself from experts' scoffing. " 'Sapiens' leapfrogs that, by saying, 'Let's ask questions *so* large that nobody can say, "We think this bit's wrong and that bit's wrong," ' " Gunn said. "Because what he's doing is just building an extremely big model, about an extremely big process." He went on, "Nobody's an expert on the meaning of everything, or the history of everybody, over a long period."

Deborah Harris did not work on "Homo Deus." By then, Yahav had become Harari's agent, after closely watching Harris's process, and making a record of all her contacts. "It wasn't even done secretly!" she said, laughing.

Yahav was sitting next to her. "He's a maniac and a control freak," Harris said. In her own dealings with publishers, she continued, "I have to retain a semblance of professionalism—I want these people to like me. He didn't care! He's never going to see these people again, and sell anything else to them. They can all think he's horrible and ruthless."

They discussed the controversy over the pliant Russian translation of "21 Lessons." Harris said that, if she had been involved, "that would not have happened."

Yahav, who for the first time looked a little pained, asked Harris if she would have refused all of the Russian publisher's requests for changes.

"Russia, you don't fuck around," she said. "You don't give them an inch." She asked Harari if he would do things differently now.

"Hmm," he said. Harari drew a distinction between changes he had approved and those he had not: for example, he hadn't known that, in the dedication, "husband" would become "partner." In public remarks, Harari has defended allowing some changes as an acceptable compromise when trying to reach a Russian audience. He has also said, "I'm not willing to write any lies. And I'm not willing to add any praise to the regime."

They discussed the impending "Sapiens" spinoffs. Harris, largely enthusiastic about the plans, said, "I'm just not a graphic-novel person." She then told Harari to wait before writing again. "I think you should learn to fly a plane," she said. "You could do anything you want. Walk the Appalachian Trail."

One day in mid-September, Harari walked into an auditorium set up in an eighteenth-century armory in Kyiv, wearing a Donna Karan suit and bright multicolored socks. He had just met with Olena Zelenska, the wife of the Ukrainian President. The next day, he would meet Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine's former President, and accept a gift box of chocolates made by Poroshenko's company. Harari was about to give a talk at a Yalta European Strategy conference, a three-day, invitation-only event modelled on Davos. YES is funded by Victor Pinchuk, the billionaire manufacturing magnate, with the aim of promoting Ukraine's orientation toward the West, and of promoting Victor Pinchuk.

As people took their seats, Harari stood with Pinchuk at the front of the auditorium, and for a few minutes he was exposed to strangers. Steven Pinker, the Harvard cognitive psychologist, introduced himself. David Rubenstein, the billionaire investor and co-founder of the Carlyle Group, gave Harari his business card. Rubenstein has become a "thought leader" at gatherings like YES, and he interviews wealthy people for Bloomberg TV. (Later that day, during a YES dinner where President Volodymyr Zelensky was a guest, Rubenstein interviewed Robin Wright, the "House of Cards" star. His questions were not made less awkward by being barked. "*You're obviously a very attractive woman*," he said. "How did you decide what you wanted to do?")

Harari's talk lasted twenty-four minutes. He used schoolbook-style illustrations: chimney stacks, Michelangelo's David. Nobody on Harari's staff had persuaded him not to represent mass unemployment with art work showing only fifty men. He argued that the danger facing the world could be "stated in the form of a simple equation, which might be the defining equation of the twenty-first century: B times C times D equals AHH. Which means: biological knowledge, multiplied by computing power, multiplied by data, equals the ability to hack humans." After the lecture, Harari had an onstage discussion with Pinchuk. "We should change the focus of the political conversation," Harari said, referring to A.I. And: "This is one of the purposes of conferences like this—to change the global conversation." Throughout Harari's event, senior European politicians in the front row chatted among themselves.

When I later talked to Steven Pinker, he made a candid distinction between speaking opportunities that were "too interesting to turn down" and others "too lucrative to turn down." Hugo Chittenden, a director at the London Speaker Bureau, an agency that books speakers for events like YES, told me that Harari's fee in Kyiv would reflect the fact that he's a fresh face; there's only so much enthusiasm for hearing someone like Tony Blair give the speech he's given on such occasions for the past decade. On the plane to Kyiv, Yahav had indicated to me that Harari's fee would be more than twice what Donald Trump was paid when he made a brief video appearance at YES, in 2015. Trump received a hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

In public, at least, Harari doesn't echo Pinker's point about money gigs, and he won't admit to having concerns about earning a fee that might compensate him, in part, for laundering the reputations of others. "We can't check everyone who's coming to a conference," he told me. He was unmoved when told that Jordan Peterson, the Canadian psychologist and self-help author known for his position that "the masculine spirit is under assault," had cancelled his YES appearance. Later this year, in Israel, Harari plans to have a private conversation with Peterson. Harari said of Peterson's representatives, "They offered to do a public debate. And we said that we don't want to, because there is a danger that it will just be mud wrestling." Yahav had earlier teased Harari, saying, "You don't argue. If somebody says something you don't like, you don't say, 'I don't like it.' You just shut up."

In Kyiv, Harari gave several interviews to local journalists, and sometimes mentioned a man who had been on our flight from Israel to Ukraine. After the plane left the gate, there was a long delay, and the man stormed to the front, demanding to be let off. There are times, Harari told one reporter, when the thing "most responsible for your suffering is your own mind." The subject of human suffering—even extreme suffering—doesn't seem to agitate Harari in quite the way that industrial agriculture does. Indeed, Harari has taken up positions against what he calls humanism, by which he means "the worship of humanity," and which he discovers in, among other places, the foundations of Nazism and Stalinism. (This characterization has upset humanists.) Some of this may be tactical—Harari is foregrounding a contested animal-rights position—but it also reflects an aspect of his Vipassana-directed thinking. Human suffering occurs; the issue is how to respond to it. Harari's suggestion that the airline passenger, in becoming livid about the delay, had largely made his own misery was probably right; but to turn the man into a case study seemed to breeze past all of the suffering that involves more than a transit inconvenience.

The morning after Harari's lecture, he welcomed Pinker to his hotel suite. They hadn't met before this trip, but a few weeks earlier they had arranged to film a conversation, which Harari would release on his own platforms. Pinker later joked that, when making the plan, he'd spoken only with Harari's "minions," adding, "*I* want to have minions." Pinker has a literary agent, a speaking agent, and, at Harvard, a part-time assistant. Contemplating the scale of Harari's operation, he said, without judgment, "I don't know of any other academic or public intellectual who's taken that route."

Pinker is the author of, most recently, "Enlightenment Now," which marshals evidence of recent human progress. "We live longer, suffer less, learn more, get smarter, and enjoy more small pleasures and rich experiences," he writes. "Fewer of us are killed, assaulted, enslaved, oppressed, or exploited." He told me that, while preparing to meet Harari, he had refreshed his skepticism about futurology by rereading two well-known essays—Robert Kaplan's "The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Overpopulation, Tribalism, and Disease Are Rapidly Destroying the Social Fabric of Our Planet," published in *The Atlantic* in 1994, and "The Long Boom," by Peter Schwartz and Peter Leyden, published in *Wired* three years later ("We're facing 25 years of prosperity, freedom, and a better environment for the whole world. You got a problem with that?").

As a camera crew set up, Harari affably told Pinker, "The default script is that you will be the optimist and I will be the pessimist. But we can try and avoid this." They chatted about TV, and discovered a shared enthusiasm for "Shtisel," an Israeli drama about an ultra-Orthodox family, and "Veep."

"What else do you watch?" Harari asked.

" 'The Crown,' " Pinker said.

"Oh, 'The Crown' is great!"

Harari had earlier told me that he prefers TV to novels; in a career now often focussed on ideas about narrative and interiority, his reflections on art seem to stop at the observation that "fictions" have remarkable power. Over supper in Israel, he had noted that, in the Middle Ages, "only what kings and queens did was important, and even then not everything they did," whereas novels are likely "to tell you in detail about what some peasant did." Onstage, at YES, he had said, "If we think about art as kind of playing on the human emotional keyboard, then I think A.I. will very soon revolutionize art completely."

The taped conversation began. Harari began to describe future tech intrusions, and Pinker, pushing back, referred to the ubiquitous "telescreens" that monitor citizens in Orwell's "1984." Today, Pinker said, it would be a "trivial" task to install such devices: "There could be, in every room, a government-operated camera. They could have done that decades ago. But they haven't, certainly not in the West. And so the question is: why didn't they? Partly because the government didn't have that much of an interest in doing it. Partly because there would be enough resistance that, in a democracy, they couldn't succeed."

Harari said that, in the past, data generated by such devices could not have been processed; the K.G.B. could not have hired enough agents. A.I. removes this barrier. "This is not science fiction," he said. "This is happening in various parts of the world. It's happening now in China. It's happening now in my home country, in Israel."

"What you've identified is some of the problems of totalitarian societies or occupying powers," Pinker said. "The key is how to prevent your society from being China." In response, Harari suggested that it might have been only an inability to process such data that had protected societies from authoritarianism. He went on, "Suddenly, totalitarian regimes could have a technological advantage over the democracies."

Pinker said, "The trade-off between efficiency and ethics is just in the very nature of reality. It has always faced us—even with much simpler algorithms, of the kind you could do with paper and pencil." He noted that, for seventy years, psychologists have known that, in a medical setting, statistical decision-making outperforms human intuition. Simple statistical models could have been widely used to offer diagnoses of disease, forecast job performance, and predict recidivism. But humans had shown a willingness to ignore such models.

"My view, as a historian, is that seventy years isn't a long time," Harari said.

When I later spoke to Pinker, he said that he admired Harari's avoidance of conventional wisdom, but added, "When it comes down to it, he *is* a liberal secular humanist." Harari rejects the label, Pinker said, but there's no doubt that Harari is an atheist, and that he "believes in freedom of expression and the application of reason, and in human well-being as the ultimate criterion." Pinker said that, in the end, Harari seems to want "to be able to reject all categories."

The next day, Harari and Yahav made a trip to Chernobyl and the abandoned city of Pripyat. They invited a few other people, and hired a guide. Yahav embraced a role of half-ironic worrier about health risks; the guide tried to reassure him by giving him his dosimeter, which measures radiation levels. When the device beeped, Yahav complained of a headache. In the ruined Lenin Square in Pripyat, he told

Harari, "You're not going to die on me. We've discussed this—I'm going to die first. I was smoking for years."

Harari, whose work sometimes sounds regretful about most of what has happened since the Paleolithic era—in "Sapiens," he writes that "the forager economy provided most people with more interesting lives than agriculture or industry do"—began the day by anticipating, happily, a glimpse of the world as it would be if "humans destroyed themselves." Walking across Pripyat's soccer field, where mature trees now grow, he remarked on how quickly things had gone "back to normal."

The guide asked if anyone had heard of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare—the video game, which includes a sequence set in Pripyat.

"No," Harari said.

"Just the most popular game in the world," the guide said.

At dusk, Harari and Yahav headed back to Kyiv, in a black Mercedes. When Yahav sneezed, Harari said, "It's the radiation starting." As we drove through flat, forested countryside, Harari talked about his upbringing: his hatred of chess; his nationalist and religious periods. He said, "One thing I think about how humans work—the only thing that can replace one story is another story."

We discussed the tall tales that occasionally appear in his writing. In "Homo Deus," Harari writes that, in 2014, a Hong Kong venture-capital firm "broke new ground by appointing an algorithm named VITAL to its board." A footnote provides a link to an online article, which makes clear that, in fact, there had been no such board appointment, and that the press release announcing it was a lure for "gullible" outlets. When I asked Harari if he'd accidentally led readers into believing a fiction, he appeared untroubled, arguing that the book's larger point about A.I. encroachment still held.

In "Sapiens," Harari writes in detail about a meeting in the desert between Apollo 11 astronauts and a Native American who dictated a message for them to take to the moon. The message, when later translated, was "They have come to steal your lands." Harari's text acknowledges that the story might be a "legend."

"I don't know if it's a true story," Harari told me. "It doesn't matter—it's a good story." He rethought this. "It matters how you present it to the readers. I think I took care to make sure that at least intelligent readers will understand that it maybe didn't happen." (The story has been traced to a Johnny Carson monologue.)

Harari went on to say how much he'd liked writing an extended fictional passage, in "Homo Deus," in which he imagines the belief system of a twelfth-century crusader. It begins, "Imagine a young English nobleman named John . . ." Harari had been encouraged in this experiment, he said, by the example of classical historians, who were comfortable fabricating dialogue, and by "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," by Douglas Adams, a book "packed with so much good philosophy." No twentieth-century philosophical book besides "Sources of the Self," by Charles Taylor, had influenced him more.

We were now on a cobbled street in Kyiv. Harari said, "Maybe the next book will be a novel."

At a press conference in the city, Harari was asked a question by Hannah Hrabarska, a Ukrainian news photographer. "I can't stop smiling," she began. "I've watched all your lectures, watched everything about you." I spoke to her later. She said that reading "Sapiens" had "completely changed" her life. Hrabarska was born the week of the Chernobyl disaster, in 1986. "When I was a child, I dreamed of being an artist," she said. "But then politics captured me." When the Orange Revolution began, in 2004, she was eighteen, and "*so* idealistic." She studied law and went into journalism. In the winter of 2013-14, she photographed the Euromaidan protests, in Kyiv, where more than a hundred people were killed. "You always expect everything will change, will get better," she said. "And it doesn't."

Hrabarska read "Sapiens" three or four years ago. She told me that she had previously read widely in history and philosophy, but none of that material had ever "interested me on my core level." She found "Sapiens" overwhelming, particularly in its passages on prehistory, and in its larger revelation that she was "one of the billions and billions that lived, and didn't make any impact and didn't leave any trace." Upon finishing the book, Hrabarska said, "you kind of relax, don't feel this pressure anymore—it's O.K. to be insignificant." For her, the discovery of "Sapiens" is that "life is big, but only for me." This knowledge "lets me *own* my life."

Reading "Sapiens" had helped her become "more compassionate" toward people around her, although less invested in their opinions. Hrabarska had also spent more time on creative photography projects. She said, "This came from a feeling of 'O.K., it doesn't matter that much, I'm just a little human, no one cares.'"

Hrabarska has disengaged from politics. "I can choose to be involved, not to be involved," she said. "No one cares, and I don't care, too." ♦

LETTER FROM ARLES

LIVING PROOF

Was Jeanne Calment the oldest person who ever lived—or a fraud?

BY LAUREN COLLINS

People in France remember the summer of 1997 for the deaths of Princess Diana, Mother Teresa, and Jeanne Calment. The first became a household name by marrying into royalty; the second, by caring for the world's sick and poor. Jeanne Calment, however, was an accidental icon, her celebrity the result of a form of passivity. For a hundred and twenty-two years, five months, and fourteen days, Calment managed not to die.

She was born at home on the Rue du Roure, in Arles, one of only four addresses she ever held. That February morning, in 1875, lavender smoke commingled with the cold in the tight streets of La Roquette, a traditional neighborhood of fishermen and the maritime trades. Plastic, tea bags, public trash cans, and the zipper had yet to come into the world. The life expectancy for a French woman was forty-five. Approximately one billion five hundred million people walked the planet, and Calment would outlive them all.

Later in life, Calment claimed to have known Vincent van Gogh, telling different versions of an encounter with him in 1888. "Van Gogh was very ugly. Ugly like a louse," she once remembered. "We called him *le dingo*." According to one anecdote, van Gogh came into her family's drygoods store, on Rue Gambetta, wanting to buy canvas. Calment sometimes said that her father waited on him. Her father, however, was a shipbuilder; the store actually belonged to her husband's family. Another time Calment recalled, "My husband said to him, 'I present to you my wife.'" This recollection was also blurred: Calment, an adolescent in 1888, didn't marry for another eight years.

She had known her husband, Fernand Calment, her entire life. Their paternal grandfathers were brothers, and their paternal grandmothers were sisters, making Jeanne and Fernand double second cousins. They had a daughter, Yvonne, in 1898. Jeanne never worked, but led a busy life of recreational pursuits, including tennis, roller-skating, and stalking wild boar. The Calments lived in grand apartments above the family store. Jeanne appeared occasionally, cutting an imperious figure. "Madame Calment wanted to impose her taste on me," a woman later said, remembering a girlhood errand to buy fabric. "Stubborn, I stuck with my choice, replying in a tone that didn't please her. I haven't forgotten the pair of slaps."

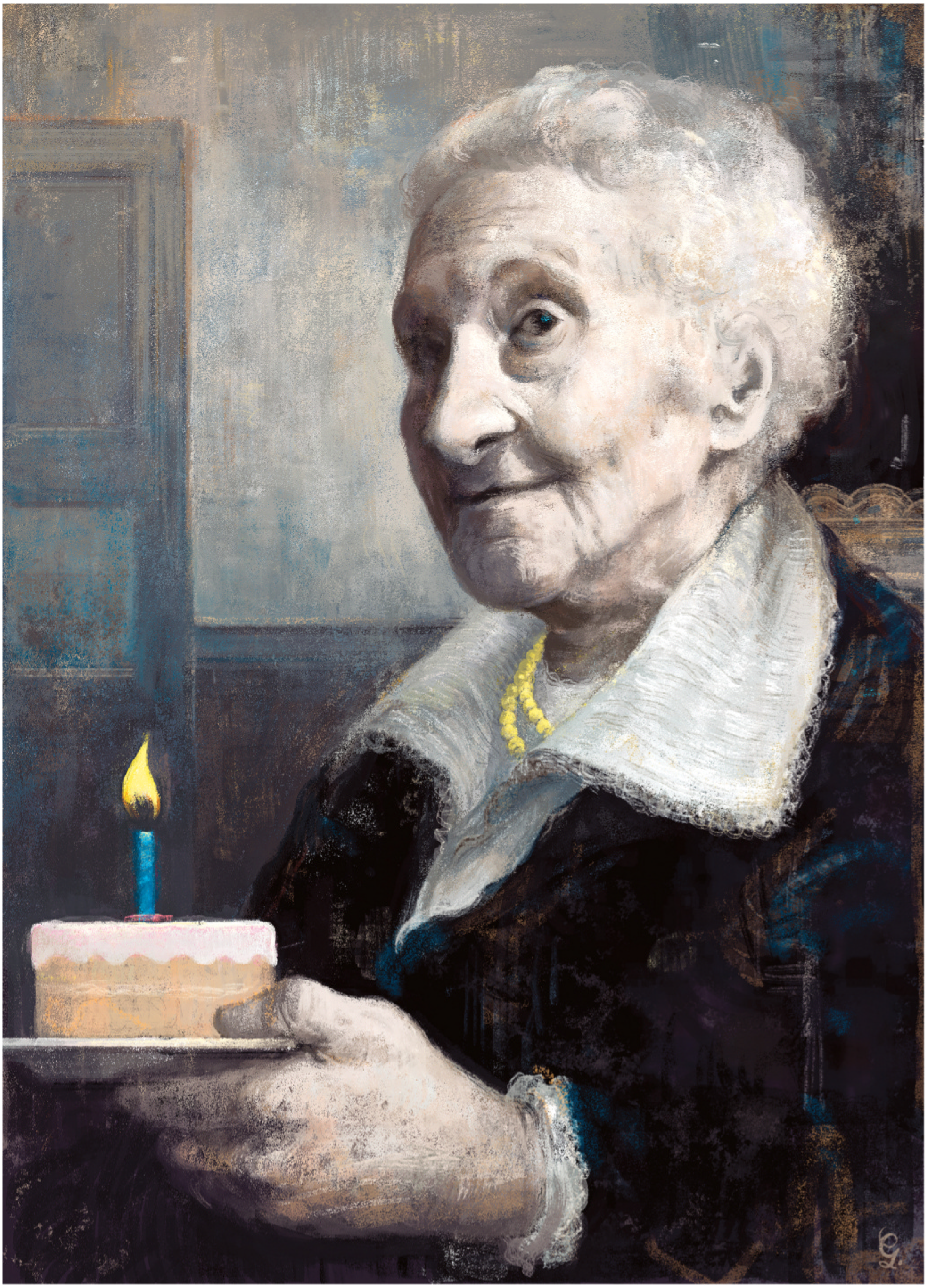
In 1934, Yvonne died of complications from tuberculosis, leaving behind a husband, Colonel Joseph Billot, and a seven-year-old son, Freddy. Jeanne and Fernand took care of the boy as though he were their own. In 1942, some friends of the Calments invited the couple to their country house. During the visit, Fernand gorged on cherries, while Jeanne had one or two. The cherries were tainted with chemicals, and, within a few months, Jeanne was a widow. Two years later, women got the vote in France. The Eiffel Tower was just past fifty. Calment was sixty-seven, with nearly half her life in front of her.

Following the death of Calment's husband, she and her son-in-law, Joseph, shared an apartment. Freddy, an otolaryngologist, lived nearby with his wife. In 1963, Calment lost her last intimates. That January, Joseph died after a long illness. In August, Freddy was killed in a car accident. Calment coped by never staying still. In the decades that followed, her staccato footfall was as integral to Arles as the sound of the mistral, the rattling Provençal wind. One biographer wrote, "Everyone knew the 'little old lady' who dashed all over town, who went down the steps of St. Trophime church like a kid."

The ground floor of the Calments' limestone building is now occupied by a supermarket. On a recent winter morning, the current owner showed me around the third floor, above where Calment lived. It was easy to imagine her waking each day, shuffling down a hallway of white tiles with red Occitan crosses, warming herself in front of a fireplace with an ornately carved walnut mantelpiece, and unlatching the floor-to-ceiling shutters, to let in the southern light. On the roof, a faded sign glowed in the sunshine: MAISON CALMENT.

When Calment was ninety-four, in 1969, her notary bought her apartment. The purchase was made under the French *en viager* system, in which the buyer agrees to make regular payments on a property that the seller continues to live in. In such an arrangement, the buyer essentially wagers on how quickly the seller will die. The Calment apartment proved to be an epically terrible investment. By the time the notary died, in 1995, he'd spent nearly two hundred thousand dollars, more than twice the value of the place, without ever taking occupancy.

As Calment approached her hundredth year, she was still riding her bicycle. Just before her birthday, the mayor of Arles offered to organize a celebration. Calment declined, calling the mayor *un rouge*, a Communist. Not long after, thinking better of her manners, she went to see him at the town hall. "In the waiting room, there were several people," he later said. "I didn't spot a centenarian. In fact, she was right in front of my eyes. A little woman in a gray suit, wearing a hat with a fine veil. I noticed her heeled shoes and seamed stockings. Very elegant,



Since Calment died, in 1997, at a hundred and twenty-two, her claim to the longevity record has come under attack.

ILLUSTRATION BY GÉRARD DuBOIS

she seemed twenty years younger."

At a hundred and ten, Calment was still living alone, in the Rue Gambetta apartment, where she had never bothered to install a modern heating system. One day, she climbed up on a table to unfreeze the boiler with the flame of a candle, starting a small fire. She agreed to move to a local retirement home, the Maison du Lac, until the weather improved. She ended up staying, and, in 1988, at a hundred and twelve, was briefly recognized as the "doyenne of humanity," the oldest person in the world. Soon afterward, the title was given to a Florida woman three months her elder, who had spent seventy-five years in a mental hospital after being diagnosed with "post-typhoid psychosis," a disease that doctors no longer believed existed. After the woman died, at a hundred and sixteen, in 1991, Calment became the oldest person ever known to have lived.

A team of three researchers who spent several years validating Calment's age—Victor Lèbre, her personal doctor; Michel Allard, a gerontologist; and Jean-Marie Robine, a demographer—described her as a "tough cookie." At the Maison du Lac, she maintained a rigid schedule, rising at six-forty-five, saying her prayers, performing calisthenics, and listening to classical music on her Walkman. She proudly told *Paris Match* that her breasts remained as firm as "two little apples." At night, she insisted that her bed be turned down, as though she were a guest in a hotel. Behind her back, the nurses called her *la commandante.* She quit smoking at a hundred and seventeen, but never gave up having a nightly glass of port.

The longer Calment lived, the more famous she became. On Grandmother's Day, a well-known television presenter offered her a kilo of chocolate. "I want a ton!" Calment replied. Several weeks later, two trucks showed up. Even the validators were dazzled by their subject. They recorded hours of conversations with her, excerpts of which they later published in a book, "Les 120 Ans de Jeanne Calment." Occasionally, she'd use a word so antiquated (like *mahonne*, a kind of round-bottomed barge that her father had built) that the validators had to look it up. "We were truly in the state of excitation of an Egyptologist who, while walking through an unexplored labyrinth of a pyramid, discovers an unknown room filled with treasures," they wrote. Calment lived through twenty French Presidents and survived periods of terrorism that no one even recalled. She died on August 4, 1997, of unspecified causes. She was buried in her family's tomb, where she rested in peace until early last year.

The first public attack on Jeanne Calment's authenticity appeared in the tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, in November, 2018. In an interview, Valery Novoselov, a geriatrician and the director of the gerontology chapter of the Moscow Society of Naturalists, announced his intention to disprove Calment's claim to the longevity title. A burly former doctor in the Russian Army, Novoselov said that he had been looking at some photographs of Calment and found that she simply didn't display the physical characteristics one would expect of a person her age. "In the picture of 110-year-old Jeanne, I see a strong lady a little younger than 90," he declared.

He had shared his doubts with Nikolay Zak, a mathematician he knew from Facebook. In contrast to Novoselov, Zak had a dishevelled look and résumé, having published little since a 2007 thesis. He was working as a glassblower, fabricating flasks and beakers for the chemistry department at Moscow State University. Intrigued, he agreed to work on the Calment case. Using a database of centenarians, he calculated that the probability of someone reaching the age of a hundred and twenty-two was "infinitesimally small." As Zak explained to *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the numbers were telling him that Calment couldn't have lived that long.

He started scouring the Internet. He found it strange that Calment didn't mention the cholera epidemic that ravaged Arles in 1884; that, upon moving out of her apartment, she had enlisted a relative to burn her personal effects; that her grandson had called her Manzane, a portmanteau of *maman* and a childish pronunciation of her first name. Calment had often equivocated in conversations about her family. ("That's a useless question!" she once barked, when an interviewer asked if she'd loved her grandson.) An identity card from the nineteen-thirties said that she had black eyes, but, at the end of her life, one report recorded them as gray. Furthermore, according to the card, Calment's height, in middle age, had been a hundred and fifty-two centimetres. If that was true, then how could she have still stood a hundred and fifty centimetres tall at the age of a hundred and fourteen, as one record suggested, having lost almost no height? Meanwhile, her signature, Zak thought, had changed tremendously over the years, acquiring a looping "J."

There were the van Gogh stories, in which she'd mixed up her husband and her father. In addition, Calment had told her validators that she had been escorted to school by a maid named Marthe Touchon. Census documents confirmed that a Marthe worked for the Calment family in the early nineteen-hundreds. She was listed as Marthe Fousson, a variation on the name that seemed reasonable, given that Calment had difficulty enunciating at the end of her life. Yet, when Zak tracked down Fousson's birth certificate, he found an odd discrepancy: Marthe Fousson was ten years younger than Jeanne Calment and thus couldn't very well have taken her to school.

Zak started fiddling with Photoshop, examining Calment's lower lip, the skin on her chin, the tip of her nose, and the shape of her skull at various ages. Soon he had developed a theory: the person the world had known and fêted as Jeanne Calment was actually her daughter, Yvonne. According to Zak, Jeanne had died in 1934, but the Calment family had presented the corpse to the authorities as Yvonne, in order to avoid inheritance taxes. This, he said, would explain "the strange cohabitation of 'mother-in-law' with 'son-in-law'; the 'grandson' who called his 'grandmother' mom," not to mention the advantageous *en viager* deal. In the course of more than six decades, he posited, a family secret had metastasized into a national conspiracy. *Komsomolskaya*

Pravda declared that the reputations of Calment's validators would soon "pop like a soap bubble."

A carnival atmosphere often surrounds the very old—gilded proclamations, giant cakes—but they are critical to science, which relies on extreme cases to define its sense of the possible. If, for the general public, supercentenarians—people who live to or beyond the age of a hundred and ten—are emissaries of the past, for biologists they are messengers from the future. Supercentenarians often look and feel younger than their age might suggest, and they tend to elude the diseases, such as cancer, Alzheimer's, and diabetes, that kill off most of their peers. Some scientists believe that clues to extending and improving human life are embedded in their DNA.

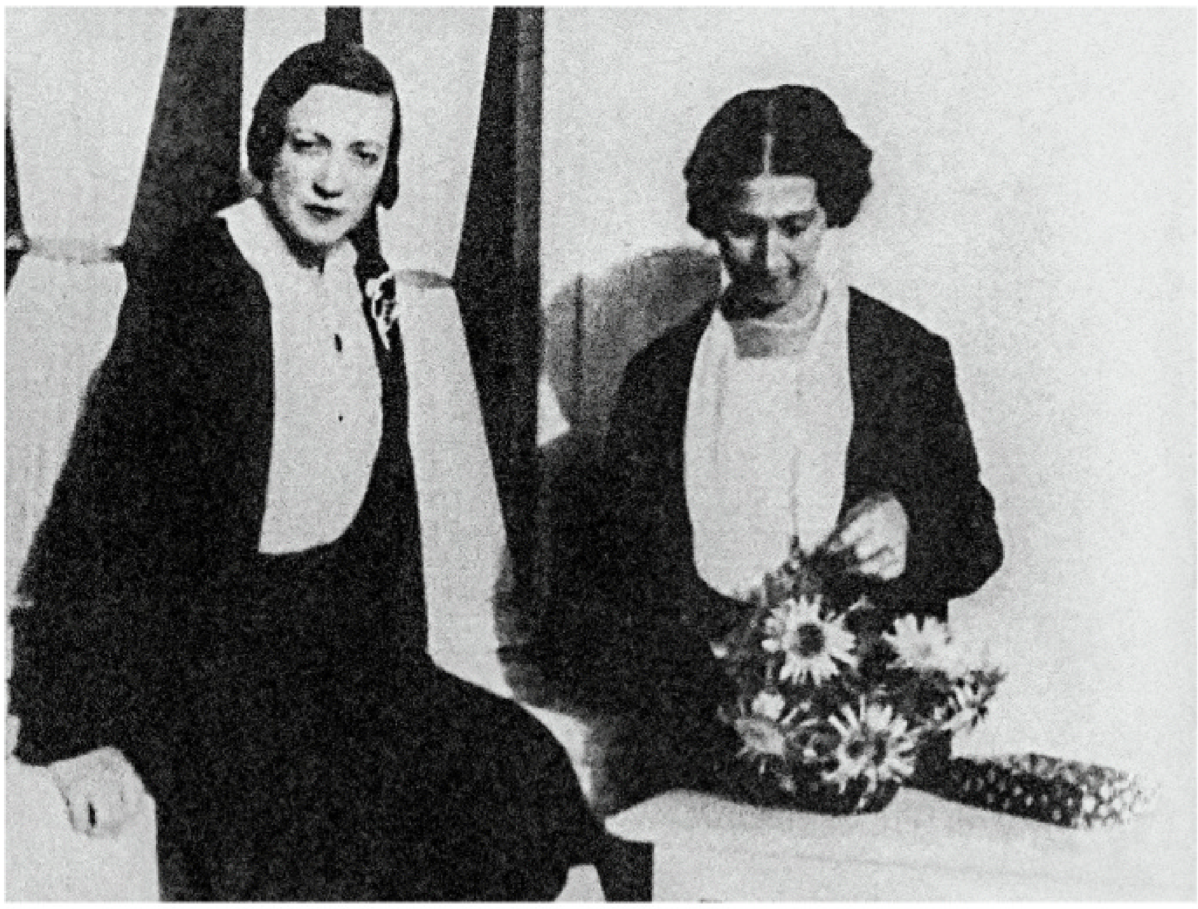
Herodotus wrote about the Macrobians, a legendary people who drank milk, ate boiled flesh, and "lived to be a hundred and twenty years old." Methuselah was supposed to have lived almost a millennium. The Victorians became obsessed with the phenomenon of longevity, attempting to tap the fountain of youth as they had the natural resources of the Empire. In 1873, William Thoms, a librarian at the House of Lords, set forth a system of age validation that more or less remains in use today. Through archival research, he debunked the legend of Thomas Parr, a Shropshire man whose longevity so impressed the Earl of Arundel that, in 1635, he sent him on a palanquin to London, to meet the king. Parr dropped dead soon thereafter, at the alleged age of a hundred and fifty-two. After a thorough autopsy—the king's coroner examined Parr's genitals, concluding that he'd been sexually active into his fourteenth decade—Parr was buried at Westminster Abbey.

According to a 2010 paper, "Typologies of Extreme Longevity Myths," sixty-five per cent of people who purport to be a hundred and ten are wrong or lying. For those who claim to be a hundred and fifteen, the rate of inaccuracy is ninety-eight per cent. Sometimes people don't know their real ages. Other times, people exaggerate for reasons of prestige, financial gain, religious practice, family honor, or regional or national chauvinism. Pension scams and the desire to avoid or participate in military service are frequently the causes of incorrect age claims, as are administrative errors. (The United States didn't have a centralized birth-registration system until 1933.) Some people's motivations are as unpredictable as human nature. In the nineteen-fifties, men posed as Confederate veterans in order to sustain a myth of Southern imperishability: "If we couldn't beat 'em, we can outlive 'em." Norris McWhirter, the co-founder of Guinness World Records, wrote, "No single subject is more obscured by vanity, deceit, falsehood, and deliberate fraud than the extremes of human longevity."

In a field plagued by data-quality issues, Jeanne Calment had long been considered the gold standard. This was partly due to chance: because she'd married her cousin, she'd had the same name throughout her life, the entirety of which she'd spent in Arles, which possesses some of the most well-preserved archives of any municipality in the world. Working with a genealogist, her validators reconstructed the Calment family tree going back seven generations. The Thoms method of validation required five "species of evidence." They had dozens, including Calment's original birth certificate, her marriage certificate, and seventeen census documents in which she appeared, dating back to 1876.

Over the years, questions about Calment's record had surfaced occasionally, but nothing much came of them. A book about the French insurance industry, published in 2007, claimed that an insurer had uncovered Calment's real identity in the nineties, but that French authorities didn't want to undermine "a figure who'd become mythic." Scientists, too, had raised doubts about Calment. Leonid Gavrilov and Natalia Gavrilova, husband-and-wife demographers at the University of Chicago, wrote that Calment's hundred-and-twenty-two-year life span was "particularly provocative" because it so handily outstripped

"Late, as usual."



The only known photograph of Jeanne (right) and her daughter, Yvonne, as adults.

NOLWENN BROD / AGENCE VU / REDUX

the competition. The second-longest-living person died in 1999, at a hundred and nineteen. The gerontologist Tom Kirkwood asked of Calment, in a 1999 book, "Could she be a fraud?" He concluded that "any deception on Madame Calment's part would have required extraordinary prescience and the connivance of surviving relatives and we should banish such thoughts from our minds." Even Calment's validators explored the possibility of a switch, in a 2000 publication, but surmised that it was a "crackpot" idea.

In gerontology, three years might as well be a century. According to the Gompertz law—formulated in 1825 by a British actuary named Benjamin Gompertz—the mortality rate for adult humans roughly doubles with every additional eight years of age. In other words, however likely you are to die in 2020, you will be twice as likely in 2028, and four times as likely in 2036. But the Gompertz curve seems to flatten after about a hundred years of age, creating what some scientists call the "late-life mortality plateau." Gavrilov and Gavrilova have explained that the deceleration of the death rate in old age, if accurate, could suggest that there is no fixed limit to the human life span. Scientists disagree about whether the late-life mortality plateau is the consequence of faulty data.

The passage of time often quells controversy, but, in the Calment case, it only unsettled the dust. As the world's population continued to grow, the cohort of people living to the age of a hundred and twenty-two did not. More than two decades after Calment's death, her record still stood, making her a more conspicuous outlier with every year that went by. Either she had lived longer than any human being ever or she had executed an audacious fraud. As one observer wrote, "Both are highly unlikely life stories but one is true." In "Les 120 Ans de Jeanne Calment," her validators had reproduced the only picture known to exist of the two Calment women as adults. In it, Yvonne appears to be sitting on a windowsill. Jeanne stands to her left, behind a table, looking down at a basket of flowers and a wrapped gift. The women are both wearing white shirts and dark sweaters. Accompanying the photograph was a tantalizing caption: "Jeanne and Yvonne, her daughter. Which one is which?"

On December 19, 2018, Nikolay Zak posted a preprint—in academia, a draft of a paper that hasn't yet been peer-reviewed—to ResearchGate, a social network for scientists. It began with a quote from Genesis ("Then the LORD said, 'My spirit will not contend with humans forever, for they are mortal; their days will be a hundred and twenty years'"), and reiterated in somewhat more decorous language the case that he and Novoselov had made to *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, adding some new details. On one page, Zak would perform complicated mathematical equations; on the next, he'd cite Wikipedia or the *Daily Mail*. At times, his logic leaped into the realm of pure speculation. "Being in the nursing home and not being able to destroy the documents herself, Jeanne resorted to the help of a distant relative," he wrote, referring to Calment's decision to burn most of her personal papers. "Most likely, it was a result of cold calculation and acute necessity instead of an emotional act."

Zak's paper, though unconventional, was enticing. The A.F.P., France's wire service, picked it up, and, on New Year's Eve, articles about the controversy appeared in a number of newspapers. Soon the Calment story had become an "*affaire*," an appellation that, in France, describes a dramatic episode while more or less guaranteeing its escalation. France 2, the national television broadcaster, devoted a prime-time special to the "enigma of Jeanne Calment," and *Le Monde* examined the "crazy hypothesis of two Russian researchers," citing experts who likened the Russians' methods to those of "fake news."

The case might have remained largely the concern of gerontologists and the French had Aubrey de Grey not got involved. The posh, wild-bearded panjandrum of the anti-aging movement, de Grey was born in London in 1963. After a career in artificial intelligence, he began studying biology, earning a Ph.D. from Cambridge at the age of thirty-seven. Now, as the chief science officer of the SENS (Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence) Research Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Mountain View, California, he is attempting to develop medical therapies that will reverse aging. He claims that there are human beings alive right now who could live more than a thousand years.

Species such as sea anemones and hydras show no signs of senescence, and many researchers believe that aging is not inevitable. As Tom Kirkwood, the gerontologist, has written, "Ageing comes about through the gradual build-up of unrepaired faults in the cells and tissues of our bodies as we live our lives, not as a result of some active mechanism for death and destruction." In recent years, the desire of Silicon Valley moguls to acquire the one thing you can't buy has kicked off a sort of space race for "life extension." The PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel has donated at least five million dollars to de Grey's projects. De Grey himself contributed another thirteen million in 2011, after receiving an inheritance from his mother. A certain eccentricity has only added to his aura. "De Grey relaxes by hoisting a pint in his local pub and occasionally picnicking nude with his considerably older wife," the L.A. *Times* noted, in a review of a 2014 documentary called "The Immortalists."

De Grey is the editor-in-chief of *Rejuvenation Research*, a biogerontology journal, which, in February, 2019, published an article by Zak, "Evidence That Jeanne Calment Died in 1934—Not 1997." The article was based on his preprint, with some changes and new conjectures. Notably, Zak contended that photographs of Yvonne showed the presence of a fibroma—a fleshy bump—on the tip of her nose, which matched with one in a picture of Calment as an old woman. "Interestingly, it is absent from later photos, indicating that it was removed," he wrote, to account for pictures of Calment as an even older woman with no such fibroma. Earlier, Zak had raised the possibility of exhuming Calment's body; now he proposed another way to examine her DNA. Calment had reportedly given a blood sample to researchers as part of the Chronos Project, a pioneering survey of more than a thousand French centenarians, conducted in the nineteen-nineties by the Fondation Jean Dausset-CEPH, a renowned genetic-research center. Zak asserted "that biological material from the person who died in 1997" was likely still in storage.

S. Jay Olshansky, a gerontologist at the University of Illinois at Chicago, told me, "I did not find the paper to be of a very high quality. If I were the editor, I would not have accepted it." Many readers were confounded: why had de Grey decided to bestow the imprimatur of academic respectability on Zak's work? Outlandish conspiracy theories proliferated. Was de Grey, an "international adjunct professor" at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, somehow in league with the Russians? Was it Big Pharma? Was it Putin? Or was there a plot involving the Lifeboat Foundation, a techno-survivalist organization to which de Grey and Zak both belonged, which had been infiltrated by Russian spies? "These are bad guys, playing nasty games," Robert Young, a consultant for Guinness World Records and a director of the Gerontology Research Group, which maintains a database of supercentenarians, told me. "This is a manufactured controversy—we don't even consider the case to be disputed."

Calment's validators suddenly had to defend work that they'd done twenty-five years earlier. One of them, Victor Lèbre, had died. Michel Allard, the gerontologist, had retired and was living in a village in central France. When I spoke with him, he seemed mildly amused by the whole thing. He'd initially been open to the possibility of fraud, but he'd dug up his files and concluded that the idea was ridiculous. "I tried to construct a scenario, but can you imagine that someone would do all that?" he said. "At a certain point, we need to be reasonable." As for the DNA, he said, "It's not in my fridge."

The third validator, Jean-Marie Robine, was a director at INSERM, France's national health-research institute. He took the Russians' attacks on his reputation seriously. "It's nonsense, and not only is it nonsense but it was a hostile approach and not a scientific approach," he told me, of Zak's *Rejuvenation Research* paper. "Why did they launch this operation like kamikazes? Why did they throw down sixty weak arguments?" Robine did not think Putin or the K.G.B. was involved. De Grey, he believed, wanted access to Calment's blood, which was said to be stored in a refrigerated biobank at the Fondation Dausset.

Claudine Serena was a little girl when she saw Jeanne Calment one day near her school. Her mother had just arrived for pickup. "What do you know, here comes Mother Calment," she said, as a slender, fast-walking figure proceeded down the street. Serena's family wasn't fond of the local haute bourgeoisie. "My grandfather was a Communist, and Jeanne didn't like Communists, because she accused them of the Russian Revolution," Serena explained. Like Calment, her grandfather lived almost his entire life in Arles. "He would have known the difference between her and her daughter," Serena said. "And if he'd had the slightest suspicion he would have denounced her."

We were sitting in the courtyard of a café in Arles, with Cécile Pellegrini, another native Arlésienne. They were both members of a Facebook group called Contre Enquête sur l'Enquête Jeanne Calment (Counter-Investigation of the Jeanne Calment Investigation), which was using the collective talents of more than a thousand ordinary people to try to clear Calment's name. Neither Serena nor Pellegrini could quite believe what they'd got into. Serena was retired from the Maison du Lac retirement home, where she'd worked as a caregiver for fifteen years, ten of them looking after Calment. "She had these small eyes, with an incisive look," she recalled. "Very condescending, '*ma fille*,' et cetera." She added, "I didn't like her, so I'm impartial." Pellegrini, a social worker, normally spent her time online posting pictures of her four cats. Now both were devoting hours a day to detective work and sparring with Zak. (Gamely, they'd allowed him to join the Facebook group.)

"*C'est du James Bond*," Serena said.

I asked why they'd got involved.

"In spite of it all, this stung me," Serena said. "We're not idiots. What's insulting is that Zak doesn't believe us."

"As if we were hiding a secret villain," Pellegrini said.

"He lives behind his computer on the other side of the world," Serena added.

Arles has a huddled, electric energy. For millennia, the Rhône was its lifeblood, but the city faces inward, as though it were too vain to acknowledge its benefactor. Plant a flower in Arles, hit a Roman relic with your shovel. The mistral might blow the teeth out of your mouth. The designer Christian Lacroix, who was born there, wrote of a sombre palette: "the funereal blue of cypresses," the "sky baked white." Van Gogh painted the city in violet, cobalt, gold, and chartreuse. As Lacroix put it, "It's not so much Arles that gave its colors to van Gogh but van Gogh who gave Arles its colors." Serena mentioned that her great-grandmother slept sitting upright in a chair, so as to preserve her traditional Arlésienne coif.

Zak argued that the people of Arles were too close to the Calment case to be rational. But the counter-investigators were mounting a meticulous defense. They started off by toppling Zak's theory about the Calments' financial motive. One of the group's best researchers, a telecommunications engineer named François Robin-Champigneul, showed that, in 1934, inheritance taxes for the family would likely have amounted to six per cent of Jeanne's assets, which totalled around two hundred and fifty thousand francs. This was a rate that they surely could have managed, particularly given—*et voilà!*—the group's discovery that Jeanne had inherited a minor fortune from her father, in 1926.

Moreover, Yvonne would have had to pretend to be her own father's wife. It also beggared belief that Freddy, a seven-year-old, either would not notice that his mother had taken his grandmother's place or would accept the switch and say nothing about it for the rest of his life. Only a few people who ever saw the family members together are still alive. One of them, Gilberte Mery, whose grandfather was Jeanne's first cousin, told *Le Journal du Dimanche* that the switch theory was "completely idiotic." Recalling the Arles tradition of promenades, she said, "We looked at who walked with whom, we noticed if someone changed her dress. Can you imagine if, all of a sudden, people no longer saw Aunt Jeanne but Yvonne?"

Zak quickly came up with a new rationale for an identity switch: Jeanne had contracted tuberculosis, and the family lied about it to protect its livelihood and shield itself from social stigma. Why would the Calments cover for Jeanne's tuberculosis by saying that Yvonne had died of tuberculosis? In Zak's scenario, Yvonne was infected with the disease first, and transmitted it to Jeanne sometime around 1926. In the following years, Jeanne started to show symptoms. Fearing that news of her illness would affect business at the store, she began to spend most of her time outside Arles. Zak had noticed, in the France 2 special, a partly blurred-out page of a medical student's 1993 thesis on Jeanne Calment. The words *séquelles pleurales*—pleural effusions, or buildups of fluid around the lungs, which are sometimes a marker of tubercular infections—were just visible. Yvonne, he believed, had recovered from the disease. In her mother's absence, she would occasionally use the older woman's I.D. card to sign important documents. The fraud was meant to be temporary, but, once it got going, it became impossible to stop.

Some of the members of the Facebook group called themselves "Jeanne's Angels." They kept turning up new pieces of evidence, such as a 1983 letter, proffered by a family member, in which Calment used an abbreviation—"Xbre" for *décembre*—that was popular in the nineteenth century. Calment had told her validators stories about her dressmaker, her midwife, and her math teacher. The group found all of them in old documents, living in the right place and at the right time. "No matter how much you formatted someone, I can't imagine them coming out with that," Karen Ritchie, a neuropsychologist who examined Calment in 1993, told me, adding that Calment had recounted the names of the makers of her wedding cutlery and crockery.

Calment's piano teacher, Césarie Gachon, proved to be a compelling witness from beyond the grave. Documents confirmed that Gachon, born in 1867, lived in an apartment behind her parents' bakery, just as Calment had once recalled. In order to rule out the possibility that Yvonne had had the same memories, a group member examined several censuses. By 1911, when Jeanne was thirty-six and Yvonne thirteen, the bakery was gone and Gachon's parents were dead. "These can't be Yvonne's memories, then, but those of Jeanne," the group member wrote, in a Facebook post. "Too precise, in my opinion, for the daughter to have heard them from the mother and remembered them to recount eighty years later."

In the comments, Zak chimed in, claiming that Calment had once said that she began playing the piano at the age of seven. Gachon would only have been fourteen then, and thus,

"Some call it jury tampering. I call it destiny."

Zak wrote, "this is yet another argument for the I.D. switch."

As for the dressmaker, Zak posited that if she were "a famous couturier she could leave a label with her name on the dress and people could remember her after her death."

A group member sarcastically wrote back, "Celebrity in Arles isn't quite Chanel."

The group's most important discoveries involved Yvonne, whose apparently short life was much less well known than her mother's long one. A letter showed that, in 1928, Yvonne was sick enough for Joseph Billot to have requested a five-year leave of absence from the military. "It's with regret that he leaves the Army, but his interests and the health of his wife oblige him to go live in the Midi, near Arles," a superior of Billot's wrote. Newspaper articles, preserved on microfiche, described Yvonne's funeral—a public event, not the rushed burial that one would expect from a family trying to get away with a body switch. A priest administered the last rites and led a funeral Mass at St. Trophime. According to one account, a "particularly abundant crowd" of mourners processed from the Billot residence, where, per local custom, they would have been able to view the corpse.

One photograph of Yvonne was especially mysterious. It had first appeared in 1995, on the cover of a special edition of *Le Figaro* magazine, mislabelled as an image of Jeanne. Now everyone agreed that the subject of the photograph was Yvonne, but questions about its provenance persisted. The photograph was clearly taken on a summer day in the mountains. Fir trees and a chalet are visible in the distance. In the foreground, Yvonne poses on a balcony with an ornate railing, holding an open parasol over her right shoulder. Her dark, side-parted bob is held back with a barrette, and she is wearing what appears to be a fashionable outfit of sleeveless camp shirt and billowing pants. She doesn't really resemble her mother. She looks staunch, like the sort of person who would remember to label a covered dish.

The group initially assumed that the picture had been taken in the French Alps, maybe the Pyrenees. Then a member started searching the Internet for information about sanatoriums. This led her to an image of a sanatorium with balcony railings that looked just like the one in the picture of Yvonne. Other members picked up the trail. One of them analyzed eleven photographs he'd found of a particular cement wall. Soon they had a positive identification: the photograph showed Yvonne, at age thirty-three, standing on the east terrace of the Belvedere sanatorium, in Leysin, Switzerland, in August of 1931. Yvonne had definitively visited a treatment center for tuberculosis, then. No such evidence existed for Jeanne.

On March 10, 2019, Aubrey de Grey e-mailed Jean-Marie Robine and Michel Allard, Calment's validators. De Grey reminded them that a sample of Calment's blood was thought to be in safekeeping at the Fondation Dausset, in Paris. A test of the sample could resolve the question of Calment's identity, since Jeanne had the usual sixteen distinct great-great-grandparents, whereas Yvonne had only twelve, because of her parents' consanguineous marriage. "Personally I think that the current balance of evidence does not favour the hypothesis of an ID switch—in other words, I think it is likely that Jeanne really did live to 122," de Grey wrote. He felt, however, that the discussion around Calment presented "a huge opportunity." He went on:

> I am very unhappy to see that you two are being publicly criticised for having failed, 20 years ago, to discover various items of evidence that have recently been discovered by others, including several photos from the middle of the century. . . . I believe that a request, from you, for access to the cells at Dausset would be a powerful way to end this unfair criticism of your work.

Two weeks later, the SENS Research Foundation sponsored an anti-aging conference in Berlin, where several hundred attendees, paying up to nine hundred dollars a ticket, gathered to encounter "leading researchers from around the world." De Grey invited Nikolay Zak to speak. His bio for the conference included a quote from de Grey: "Zak's just-published investigations have cast considerable doubt on Calment's actual age at death, and lend credibility to the possibility of an identity switch with her daughter." On the second day of the conference, Zak, wearing a black T-shirt bearing the face of Charles Darwin, delivered a "special lecture" on the identity-switch hypothesis. De Grey joined him onstage, calling it "scandalous" that the Calment blood sample had been forgotten. Were it to be tested, he added, "I'm not going to say that the information will tell us the fountain of youth, but it might definitely give us some cool ideas for new experiments."

When I spoke to de Grey, in November, I asked him about the switch hypothesis. "I have much bigger fish to fry," he said. "I'm a very prominent person in the gerontology field, and I'm out to save lives. So this is not a big deal to me—you need to know that." De Grey denied that he wants Calment's blood sample for his own use. He seemed to be trying to remain publicly evenhanded about the case, while using it to shake something loose at the Fondation Dausset. He had entreated Allard and Robine to enlist Yves Christen, a famous French biologist, in the campaign to retrieve the blood sample. "I believe it falls to people like you to get Christen," he told me. "The single best thing you could do to save lives, to hasten the defeat of aging, is to get to Christen and get him to see that he has the capacity to go to Dausset and get them to release that sample!"

The examination of Calment's DNA poses ethical difficulties. Calment gave the sample on the condition of anonymity, but it is presumably identifiable by her age. Furthermore, it was intended only for certain purposes. "Jeanne Calment participated in the Chronos Project within the limits of an informed consent she signed that prevents any use of information beyond this project," Jean-François Deleuze, the scientific director of the Fondation Dausset, said.

Some people I spoke to believed that a breach of these conditions would be justifiable under certain circumstances, but it was unclear whether, in the Calment case, the benefits outweighed the costs. Establishing the truth about Jeanne Calment would be interesting, but it certainly wasn't essential. Members of the counter-investigation group argued that Calment's identity was already well established; questions about it were being used as a wedge, they suspected, to open the door for all manner of testing. The intrigue surrounding the sample grew to fill the void of authoritative information. Neither Allard nor Robine ever replied to de Grey's e-mail. "The naïveté of these people," Robine told me. "You go to the best jeweller in the world and demand that he gives you his biggest diamond?"

As the controversy continued, Zak's theories became increasingly baroque. As soon as one idea was disproved, he came up with another. Calment's late-life height, it turned out, was really a hundred and forty-three centimetres, reflecting the loss of stature that one would expect. The caption that the validators had used for the photo of Jeanne and Yvonne—"Which one is which?"—seemed to come from the slogan for a brand of soap. Zak eventually dropped the fibroma argument.

Even Zak's adversaries gave him credit for doggedness, and an unusually rich imagination. His latest idea was that the sole existing joint photograph of Jeanne and Yvonne had been taken at the sanatorium in Leysin. In this scenario, Jeanne was the patient and Yvonne was just visiting. The flowers in the shot, he said, may have been carline thistle, "a stemless alpine plant native to Switzerland and used as a herbal remedy for lung diseases including tuberculosis." In the photograph, the right side of Jeanne's body was in shadow. Zak claimed to be able to make out that the right side of her jacket was shorter than the left. From this, he concluded that Jeanne may have had her right arm amputated, "probably before she came to Leysin."

Even at his most intransigent, Zak welcomed debate. At the end of November, he agreed to meet me at a pizzeria near his home, in Moscow. He arrived in a red T-shirt and black athletic pants, with yellow circles under his eyes. I knew, from my own Internet research, that his father was a prominent mathematician. The Nikolay Zak in me found it striking that Nikolay Zak, who had once attempted to follow in his father's footsteps in algebraic geometry, had become obsessed with the idea of Yvonne taking Jeanne's place. But Zak didn't seem particularly interested in talking about his biography. Of his glassblowing job, he said, "I'm still there, though I don't work for very long hours. I just come and go." He was not being paid by de Grey, he said, as many of his detractors had alleged. "I already have money, so it's not a problem for me."

Zak said that he'd first heard about Jeanne Calment after getting interested in longevity, about ten years ago. "I read about her life style, and that she used olive oil, and I researched and found the best olive oil in the world," he said. "They make it on Corfu." In the summer of 2018, when Valery Novoselov became the head of the gerontology chapter of the Moscow Society of Naturalists, he issued a call for papers. Zak's initial subject was the naked mole rat, a hairless rodent with front teeth that look like fingernails and an unusually long life span. From naked mole rats, he pivoted to supercentenarians.

At the pizzeria, Zak said that he was "99.99 per cent" convinced that Calment was a fraud. I asked why hardly any experts in the field agreed with him. "I already told you, I get a lot of letters from people," he said. When I asked for their names, he demurred, saying, "Those who think I am right, they will still be silent until it is all proved." Talking to him felt like talking to a Magic 8-Ball.

I knew from Facebook that Zak had a habit of leading people so deep into the microdetails of Calment's life that larger, more obvious questions were easily overlooked. I was hoping to get him to address some gaps in his reasoning. Why, if Calment were hiding something, would she have agreed to the validation interviews? Why would she have given a blood sample, if she knew that her sixty-year secret could be betrayed with one drop? Why, for that matter, wouldn't she have chosen to be cremated, the ultimate form of burning one's personal effects?

"She was a bold liar," Zak replied. "If I were her, I would arrange something to show, sometime after my death, that I cheated all of you. It's much more fun for her that way, so I don't see any problem. She's already dead and got everything she ever wanted." I brought up her specific recollections of the dressmaker, the midwife, the math teacher, the piano teacher, but he didn't yield. Picking at a mushroom pizza, he added, "I'm younger than my father by thirty-four years, and I'm not very close with him, but I know the name of his math teacher."

Yvonne, Zak continued, could have been coached. This was a good point: Calment's validators, in the first chapter of their book, mention that they occasionally "re-injected" certain biographical details into their conversations with her, in the hope of activating dormant memories. When I spoke to Michel Allard, I asked him whether they had ever attempted to re-inject a false piece of information, as a sort of control. He said that they hadn't.

I agreed with Zak that the validators had sometimes taken a boosterish approach to their task, but I didn't see evidence of a conspiracy. Zak had been lobbying them to release the interview tapes, implying that they might be hiding something. The tapes, I learned from Allard, were sitting in a box in his basement; he simply hadn't bothered to fetch them. When I pushed Zak about the inconsistencies in his theory, he became annoyed. "You misunderstand the whole thing about the validation of extreme age," he said. "Everybody agrees that the burden of proof in extreme age is on the claimant and the validators, not on the skeptics."

That morning, I had met with Valery Novoselov, at Moscow State University's Zoological Museum. He

KARL STEVENS

SAMUEL BECKETT'S "WAITING FOR GODZILLA"

greeted me in a domed entryway lined with murals of wildlife, and we proceeded through a series of faded corridors—past a mastodon skeleton and a glass case emptied of all but a set of doilies—before arriving in a dusty classroom, where we sat down at a long wooden table. We were joined by two of his colleagues from the Society of Naturalists, and I had brought an interpreter. Novoselov had a boisterous, orotund way of talking that even the interpreter seemed to have trouble making sense of. After a discourse on his research into the cause of Lenin's death, Novoselov turned to Jeanne Calment. "This was taken in 1955, so she was past eighty here," he said, pulling up a photograph of Calment on his laptop. "The woman is still full of estrogen—she is just entering the early stages of menopause. It's clear that, hormonally, she is still a woman."

Novoselov remained certain that Calment couldn't have been a hundred and twenty-two years old, but he was now agnostic about the possibility of a switch. He felt that Zak, as a non-scientist, had been too hasty in publishing some of his work. "We are the people of the Soviet Union, Zak is a person from Russia," Novoselov said, at one point. "We are analog people, he is a digital person." I asked Novoselov why, given his belief in the importance of scientific method, he was willing to rely so heavily on photographs, which are notoriously open to interpretation. He started talking about the youthful look of Calment's legs. At one point, he said that he had asked specialists at the Investigative Committee, Russia's equivalent of the F.B.I., to perform a forensic analysis of some photographs. He had a letter from the committee, which I did not read until later. It stated that "the quality of the photos you submitted of Jeanne Calment and her daughter . . . does not meet the requirements for forensic portrait examination."

It felt like we weren't getting anywhere. One of the most compelling points of the case mounted by Novoselov and Zak, it had always seemed to me, was that the collective assumptions of a society can suppress unlikely truths. Every time I found myself convinced that their accusations were impossibly far-fetched, I wondered whether I wasn't just being complacent: who would have believed, for instance, that Jack Nicholson's sister was actually his mother, before *Time* sprang the news on him, in 1974?

"How old do you think I am?" I asked Novoselov.

"Seventeen," he said.

"Seriously, how old do you think I am? This is one of your methods, looking at someone and estimating their age. Write it down."

Novoselov obfuscated, but eventually I persuaded him, along with each of his colleagues, to jot down on a slip of paper the age that he perceived me to be. One of them wrote twenty-eight and another thirty-five. Novoselov's guess was forty-two. I am thirty-nine.

It's hard to find a smoking gun if there hasn't been a crime. As time went by, I grew increasingly convinced of the veracity of Jeanne Calment's record, but several loose ends troubled me. I wanted to know more about the claim, in the book about the insurance industry, that an insurer and French authorities had turned a blind eye to fraud. The source, it turned out, was a former employee of the French treasury, who did not want to be named. An insurance company had acquired the annuity (the *rente viagère*) on Jeanne Calment's apartment sometime in the sixties. According to the source, officials at the company noticed that Calment was an actuarial outlier and inquired with the treasury about the account. The source's superiors signalled that he should back off. Later, after Calment's death, one of the insurance-company officials told him that she had switched places with her daughter. The official died in the two-thousands, and, along with him, the origin of the tale.

Months after my first conversation with Michel Allard, I e-mailed him to see if, by chance, he'd unearthed the taped interviews with Calment. "You've come at just the right time," he replied. He'd got them out of his basement and, he said, was about to take them to be digitized. He agreed

"All this, as far as you can see, is just what you'd pay for a one-bedroom condo in the city."

to allow me to listen to them before he did. It was crazy to be able to hear a voice from the nineteenth century, a soul reconnected with her memories, some of which I'd already encountered on the page. "She never performed nude!" Calment said, of La Belle Otero, a famous actress of her day. "Never!" She spoke passionately, without as much prompting as I'd imagined.

In Arles, I'd met a woman named Maguy Raspail, a retired nurse who seemed to be the only person in town who supported Zak. She told me, "I found Nikolay very intelligent, and I told myself that maybe he was able to see what we, the French, weren't able to see." Raspail couldn't rebut much of the evidence attesting to Calment's authenticity, but she did tell me something interesting. Laure Meusy, the head nurse at the Maison du Lac at the time that Calment lived there, had told her that another nurse had called Calment "Yvonne" in front of the staff and other residents. Meusy confirmed this in a text message. "She would say loudly that Jeanne was her daughter, but I was her boss and she couldn't say it in front of me," she wrote. Meusy said it was "impossible that someone as natural as Jeanne was a liar." I called the other nurse, but she hung up when I mentioned Calment's name. The next time, she stayed on the line. She said that she had never doubted Calment's identity. "Are you joking, asking me that?" she said, of the rumor that she had addressed Jeanne as "Yvonne." "Not possible."

The end of Jeanne Calment's life was tumultuous, even sordid. As her fame grew, the Maison du Lac struggled to manage the demands of journalists and well-wishers. Meusy became her unofficial handler, performing the job with a clumsy mix of hawkishness and impotence. In Calment's hundred-and-twenty-first year, barely able to speak, she recorded a rap CD. Another day, as she sat immobile in her wheelchair, a Japanese clown kissed her on the mouth. After the airing of a documentary that suggested Calment was not being treated properly, the retirement home's management intervened, transferring Meusy for "failure to observe the obligation of reserve, discretion, and restraint." Calment's visitors were severely restricted, and her validators were barred from seeing her. Allard said, "She was thrown in the dungeon."

Calment died on a Monday in August, in the middle of *les grandes vacances*. One biographer conjectured that she died of boredom. Jean-Marie Robine told me that Calment had agreed to donate her brain to science. "We had a team waiting in Paris around the clock, ready to board a flight," he recalled, but Calment was buried with such "violent haste" that the team was unable to harvest the organ. Although Calment had been a devout Catholic and a celebrity, only a handful of people, mostly retirement-home personnel, were allowed to attend the burial. The next day, hundreds of mourners gathered at St. Trophime, her longtime church. In lieu of a coffin, a large picture of her stood at the altar.

Her family tomb, in the Trinquetaille Cemetery, in Arles, lies at the end of a long row of mausoleums. It's a relatively modern and simple monument in black granite. The names of Joseph and Freddy Billot are inscribed on a plaque. In the middle of the tomb, there's a marker in the shape of an open book that reads "Jeanne Calment, 1875-1997, La doyenne de l'humanité." Yvonne is buried there, too, but her name is absent. "Why there is no Yvonne's name on family grave, while there are names of Joseph and Frederic?" Zak wrote, when a Facebook fight erupted over the subject. "Explanation in the switch scenario is easy: she didn't want her name to be on the grave because she was alive." But Fernand and other relatives are buried there, too, and their names aren't marked, either. According to counter-investigators, the tomb was redone in the sixties, and is engraved only with the names of family members who have died since.

The secret of Jeanne Calment may reside in a village about an hour's drive from Arles. Renée Billot Bonnary, Freddy's widow, lives there, near the Mediterranean Sea. Bonnary, a retired dentist, was born in 1926. She is one of the last living links to the time when the Calments were a thriving Arlesian dynasty, to the long middle of her former grandmother-in-law's epoch-spanning story. Several sources suggested to me that Bonnary and Calment had a dispute after Freddy's death. The desire to keep such a conflict private could help explain why Calment chose to destroy her personal papers. It could also attest to her authenticity: if Calment had been involved in a scam, it's conceivable that Bonnary would have known and would have been motivated to expose her. I sent a letter to Bonnary and contacted a relative of hers, who eventually asked me to leave them alone.

So I went to Marseille. First, I walked from the train station to the Aix-Marseille University medical school, where I checked out Catherine Levraud's thesis from 1993, "Jeanne Calment: 118 Years, Prototype of Longevity." Levraud spent several months visiting Calment at the Maison du Lac, and charted her medical history. On page 10, I found the passage that had raised Zak's suspicions when it appeared, partially, in the special on France 2. It read, "The blood report is that of a woman of thirty years old in good health. The X-rays, however, show hyper-transparence because of the demineralization of the bones, and pleural effusions on the thorax." Zak was right: both mother and daughter may have had tuberculosis. This does not mean, however, that the person who died in 1997 was Yvonne. "Jeanne could have been touched in passing by the illness and not even known she had it," Catherine Levraud, now a doctor in Arles, told me. "In that population, it was extremely frequent." For another opinion, I called Petros Karakousis, a tuberculosis expert and a professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins, who confirmed that the presence of pleural effusions can indicate a previous tuberculosis infection, but said that they can also be attributable to "plenty of other causes," such as mild heart failure, from which Calment suffered. It made sense, Levraud added, that someone strong enough to recover completely from a disease that felled many of her peers would go on to become a supercentenarian.

François Robin-Champigneul, the telecommunications engineer who calculated the Calments' inheritance taxes, had tipped me off that there might be some interesting documents in the departmental archives of the Bouches-du-Rhône, in Marseille. (Robin-Champigneul recently published a paper in *Rejuvenation Research* defending Calment's record, and he is working on a book.) I took an Uber there and walked across a windswept plaza into a huge rectangular building of white iridescent glass. I applied for a card, stuffed my bag in a locker, and, with the help of a librarian, punched some codes into a computer. Within twenty minutes, I was sitting in front of thick, flaky ledgers containing Fernand Calment's estate documents from 1943, along with mortgage contracts from the purchase of several properties.

The documents suggest a couple in optimistic spirits. They had plenty of liquidity, with Fernand possessing a greater share of the assets. In February, 1933, they bought a country house outside Arles. Frédérique Skyronka, the granddaughter of Joseph Billot's brother, remembered spending her summer vacations in the sixties nearby. "She was already an 'old lady,' but extremely dynamic," she told me, of Jeanne. "She walked, walked, and walked—that's the secret."

A typewritten document of six time-splotched pages recorded the sale of Jeanne's childhood apartment, at 53 Rue de la Roquette, on November 28, 1931, to a M. Honoré Mistral and his wife, Mme. Clarisse Raoux, for thirty-five thousand francs. At some point, someone had underlined parts of it with an oily dark-green crayon. I flipped through, trying to focus. *Entrée en jouissance, régime dotal, impositions foncières.* The archives were closing soon.

It wasn't until weeks later, in Paris, that I understood the significance of the document. Its final section indicated that both Jeanne Calment and Lucien Arnaud, a notary in Arles, had attended the 1931 closing. Arnaud had administered the marriage contracts of Jeanne, in 1896, and Yvonne, in 1926. He was also the head of the local chapter of the Alliance Française, whose balls the Calments frequented. When Yvonne married, Jeanne, Yvonne, and Arnaud all gathered to sign the contract. According to the document I'd held in my hands, not even five years later Jeanne was standing in front of Arnaud again, to sign for the sale of 53 Rue de la Roquette. In Zak's scenario, Yvonne had already started impersonating her mother in 1931. She would have shown up before Arnaud with her hair dyed white and a looping "J" in her signature that wasn't quite right.

It is next to impossible that Yvonne could have fooled Arnaud. She could have bought him off, but the documents I had seen also showed that Jeanne appeared in front of his successor, Louis David, in 1933 and 1942. In neither case would Yvonne have been likely to present an I.D. card, false or otherwise, as Zak claimed. Both Arnaud and David knew Jeanne too well to ask for identification. How many people would Yvonne have had to co-opt? Two notaries, a priest, a seven-year-old boy, a crowd full of mourners, a whole city? The theory made no sense, and, even though I knew it, I was already thinking about what Zak would say next. ♦

with
the
beatles

HARUKI MURAKAMI

ILLUSTRATION BY ADRIAN TOMINE

What I find strange about growing old isn't that I've got older. Not that the youthful me from the past has, without my realizing it, aged. What catches me off guard is, rather, how people from the same generation as me have become elderly, how all the pretty, vivacious girls I used to know are now old enough to have a couple of grandkids. It's a little disconcerting—sad, even. Though I never feel sad at the fact that I have similarly aged.

I think what makes me feel sad about the girls I knew growing old is that it forces me to admit, all over again, that my youthful dreams are gone forever. The death of a dream can be, in a way, sadder than that of a living being.

There's one girl—a woman who used to be a girl, I mean—whom I remember well. I don't know her name, though. And, naturally, I don't know where she is now or what she's doing. What I do know about her is that she went to the same high school as I did, and was in the same year (since the badge on her shirt was the same color as mine), and that she really liked the Beatles.

This was in 1964, at the height of Beatlemania. It was early autumn. The new school semester had begun and things were starting to fall into a routine again. She was hurrying down the long, dim hallway of the old school building, her skirt fluttering. I was the only other person there. She was clutching an LP to her chest as if it were something precious. The LP "With the Beatles." The one with the striking black-and-white photograph of the four Beatles in half shadow. For some reason, I'm not sure why, I have a clear memory that it was the original, British version of the album, not the American or the Japanese version.

She was a beautiful girl. At least, to me then, she looked gorgeous. She wasn't tall, but she had long black hair, slim legs, and a lovely fragrance. (That could be a false memory, I don't know. Maybe she didn't give off any scent at all. But that's what I remember, as if, when she passed, an enchanting, alluring fragrance wafted in my direction.) She had me under her spell—that beautiful, nameless girl clutching "With the Beatles" to her chest.

My heart started to pound, I gasped for breath, and it was as if all sound had ceased, as if I'd sunk to the bottom of a pool. All I could hear was a bell ringing faintly, deep in my ears. As if someone were desperately trying to send me a vital message. All this took only ten or fifteen seconds. It was over before I knew it, and the critical message contained there, like the core of all dreams, disappeared.

A dimly lit hallway in a high school, a beautiful girl, the hem of her skirt swirling, "With the Beatles."

That was the only time I saw that girl. In the two years between then and my graduation, we never once crossed paths again. Which is pretty strange if you think about it. The high school I attended was a fairly large public school at the top of a hill in Kobe, with about six hundred and fifty students in each grade. (We were the so-called baby-boomer generation, so there were a lot of us.) Not everyone knew one another. In fact, I didn't know the names or recognize the vast majority of the kids in the school. But, still, since I went to school almost every day, and often used that hallway, it struck me as almost outrageous that I never once saw that beautiful girl again. I looked for her every time I used that hallway.

Had she vanished, like smoke? Or, on that early-autumn afternoon, had I seen not a real person but a vision of some kind? Perhaps I had idealized her in my mind at the instant that we passed each other, to the point where even if I actually saw her again I wouldn't recognize her? (I think the last possibility is the most likely.)

Later, I got to know a few women, and went out with them. And every time I met a new woman it felt as though I were unconsciously longing to relive that dazzling moment I'd experienced in a dim school hallway back in the fall of 1964. That silent, insistent thrill in my heart, the breathless feeling in my chest, the bell ringing gently in my ears.

Sometimes I was able to recapture this feeling, at other times not. And other times I managed to grab hold of it, only to let it slip through my fingers. In any event, the emotions that surged when this happened came to serve as a kind of gauge I used to measure the intensity of my yearning.

When I couldn't get that sensation in the real world, I would quietly let my memory of those feelings awaken inside me. In this way, memory became one of my most valued emotional tools, a means of survival, even. Like a warm kitten, softly curled inside an oversized coat pocket, fast asleep.

On to the Beatles.

A year before I saw that girl was when the Beatles first became wildly popular. By April of 1964, they'd captured the top five spots on the American singles charts. Pop music had never seen anything like it. These were the five hit songs: (1) "Can't Buy Me Love"; (2) "Twist and Shout"; (3) "She Loves You"; (4) "I Want to Hold Your Hand"; (5) "Please Please Me." The single "Can't Buy Me Love" alone had more than two million preorders, making it double platinum before the actual record went on sale.

The Beatles were, of course, also hugely popular in Japan. Turn on the radio and chances were you'd hear one of their songs. I liked their songs myself and knew all their hits. Ask me to sing them and I could. At home when I was studying (or pretending to study), most of the time I had the radio blasting away. But, truth be told, I was never a fervent Beatles fan. I never actively sought out their songs. For me, it was passive listening, pop music flowing out of the tiny speakers of my Panasonic transistor radio, in one ear and out the other, barely registering. Background music for my adolescence. Musical wallpaper.

In high school and in college, I didn't buy a single Beatles record. I was much more into jazz and classical music, and that was what I listened to when I wanted to focus on music. I saved up to buy jazz records, requested tunes by Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk at jazz bars, and went to classical-music concerts.

This might seem strange, but it wasn't until I was in my mid-thirties that I sat down and listened to "With the Beatles" from beginning to end. Despite the fact that the image of the girl carrying that LP in the hallway of our high school had never left me, for the longest time I didn't feel like actually giving it a listen. I wasn't particularly interested in knowing what sort of music was etched into the grooves of the vinyl disk she had clutched so tightly to her chest.

When I was in my mid-thirties, well past childhood and adolescence, my first impression of the album was that it wasn't that great, or at least not the kind of music to take your breath away. Of the fourteen tracks on the album, six were covers of other artists' works. The covers of the Marvelettes' "Please Mr. Postman" and Chuck Berry's "Roll Over Beethoven" were well done, and impress me even when I listen to them now, but, still, they were cover versions. And of the eight original songs, apart from Paul's "All My Loving," none were amazing. There were no hit singles, and to my ears the Beatles' first album, "Please Please Me," recorded basically in one take, was far more vibrant and compelling. Even so, likely thanks to Beatles fans' unquenchable desire for new songs, this second album débuted in the No. 1 spot in the U.K., a position it held for twenty-one weeks. (In the U.S., the title of the album was changed to "Meet the Beatles," and included some different tracks, though the cover design stayed almost the same.)

What pulled me in was the vision of that girl clutching the album as if it were something priceless. Take away the photograph on the album cover and the scene might not have bewitched me as it did. There was the music, for sure. But there was something else, something far bigger. And, in an instant, that tableau was etched in my heart—a kind of spiritual landscape that could be found *only* there, at a set age, in a set place, and at a set moment in time.

For me, the major event of the following year, 1965, wasn't President Johnson ordering the bombing of North Vietnam and the escalation of the war, or the discovery of a new species of wildcat on the island of Iriomote, but the fact that I acquired a girlfriend. She had been in the same class as me in freshman year, but it wasn't until sophomore year that we started going out.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I'd like to preface this by saying that I'm not good-looking and was never a star athlete, and my grades in school were less than stellar. My singing left something to be desired, too, and I didn't have a way with words. When I was in school, and in the years after that, I never once had girls flocking around me. That's one of the few things I can say with certainty in this uncertain life. Still, there always seemed to be a girl around who was, for whatever reason, attracted to me. I have no clue why, but I was able to enjoy some pleasant, intimate times with those girls. I got to be good friends with some of them, and occasionally took it to the next level. The girl I'm talking about here was one of these—the first girl I had a really *close* relationship with.

PRO-BONO BILLY
Takes Elmer for a walk because it's the right thing to do!
Makes his bed for the good of humanity!
Sets the table for a minimal fee—or sometimes NO FEE AT ALL!

This first girlfriend of mine was petite and charming. That summer, I went on dates with her once a week. One afternoon I kissed her small yet full lips and touched her breasts through her bra. She was wearing a sleeveless white dress and her hair had a citrusy shampoo scent.

She had almost no interest in the Beatles. She wasn't into jazz, either. What she liked to listen to was more mellow music, what you might call middle-class music—the Mantovani Orchestra, Percy Faith, Roger Williams, Andy Williams, Nat King Cole, and the like. (At the time, "middle class" wasn't a derogatory term at all.) There were piles of such records at her house—what nowadays is classified as easy listening.

That afternoon, she put a record on the turntable in her living room—her family had a large, impressive stereo system—and we sat on the big, comfy sofa and kissed. Her family had gone out somewhere and it was just the two of us. Truthfully, in a situation like that I didn't really care what sort of music was playing.

What I remember about the summer of 1965 was her white dress, the citrusy scent of her shampoo, the formidable feel of her wire bra (a bra back then was more like a fortress than like an item of underwear), and the elegant performance of Max Steiner's "Theme from 'A Summer Place' " by the Percy Faith Orchestra. Even now, whenever I hear "Theme from 'A Summer Place,' " that sofa comes to mind.

Incidentally, several years later—1968,

as I recall, around the same time that Robert Kennedy was assassinated—the man who had been our homeroom teacher when we were in the same class hanged himself from the lintel in his house. He'd taught social studies. An ideological impasse was said to be the cause of his suicide.

An ideological impasse?

But it's true—in the late sixties people sometimes took their own lives because they'd hit a wall, ideologically. Though not all that often.

I get a really strange feeling when I think that on that afternoon, as my girlfriend and I were clumsily making out on the sofa, with Percy Faith's pretty music in the background, that social-studies teacher was, step by step, heading toward his fatal ideological dead end, or, to put it another way, toward that silent, tight knot in the rope. I even feel bad about it sometimes. Among all the teachers I knew, he was one of the best. Whether he was successful or not is another question, but he always tried to treat his students fairly. I never spoke to him outside of class, but that was how I remembered him.

Like 1964, 1965 was the year of the Beatles. They released "Eight Days a Week" in February, "Ticket to Ride" in April, "Help!" in July, and "Yesterday" in September—all of which topped the U.S. charts. It seemed as if we were hearing their music almost all the time. It was everywhere, surrounding us, like wallpaper meticulously applied to every single inch of the walls.

When the Beatles' music wasn't playing, it was the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," or the Byrds' "Mr. Tambourine Man," or "My Girl," by the Temptations, or the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'," or the Beach Boys' "Help Me, Rhonda." Diana Ross and the Supremes also had one hit after another. A constant soundtrack of this kind of wonderful, joyful music filtered out through my little Panasonic transistor radio. It was truly an astounding year for pop music.

I've heard it said that the happiest time in our lives is the period when pop songs really mean something to us, really get to us. It may be true. Or maybe not. Pop songs may, after all, be nothing but pop songs. And perhaps our lives are merely decorative, expendable items, a burst of fleeting color and nothing more.

My girlfriend's house was near the Kobe radio station that I always tuned in to. I think her father imported, or perhaps exported, medical equipment. I don't know the details. At any rate, he owned his own company, which seemed to be doing well. Their home was in a pine grove near the sea. I heard that it used to be the summer villa of some businessman and that her family had bought and remodelled it. The pine trees rustled in the sea breeze. It was the perfect place to listen to "Theme from 'A Summer Place.'"

Years later, I happened to see a late-night TV broadcast of the 1959 movie "A Summer Place." It was a typical Hollywood film about young love, but nevertheless it held together well. In the movie, there is a pine grove by the sea, which sways in the summer breeze in time to the Percy Faith Orchestra's horn section. That scene of the pine trees swaying in the wind struck me as a metaphor for the young people's raging sexual desire. But that may just have been my take on it, my own biased view.

In the movie, Troy Donahue and Sandra Dee are swept up in that kind of overpowering sexual wind and, because of it, encounter all kinds of real-world problems. Misunderstandings are followed by reconciliations, obstacles are cleared up like fog lifting, and in the end the two come together and are married. In Hollywood in the fifties, a happy ending always involved marriage—the creation of an environment in which lovers could have sex legally. My girlfriend and I, of course, didn't get married. We were still in high school, and all we did was clumsily grope and make out on the sofa with "Theme from 'A Summer Place'" playing in the background.

"You know something?" she said to me on the sofa, in a small voice, as if she were making a confession. "I'm the really jealous type."

"Seriously?" I said.

"I wanted to make sure you knew that."

"O.K."

"Sometimes it hurts a lot to be so jealous."

I silently stroked her hair. It was beyond me at the time to imagine how burning jealousy felt, what caused it, what it led to. I was too preoccupied with my own emotions.

As a side note, Troy Donahue, that handsome young star, later got caught up in alcohol and drugs, stopped making movies, and was even homeless for a time. Sandra Dee, too, struggled with alcoholism. Donahue married the popular actress Suzanne Pleshette in 1964, but they divorced eight months later. Dee married the singer Bobby Darin in 1960, but they divorced in 1967. This is obviously totally unrelated to the plot of "A Summer Place." And unrelated to my and my girlfriend's fate.

My girlfriend had an older brother and a younger sister. The younger sister was in her second year of junior high but was a good two inches taller than her older sister. She wasn't particularly cute. Plus, she wore thick glasses. But my girlfriend was very fond of her kid sister. "Her grades in school are really good," she told me. I think my girlfriend's grades, by the way, were only fair to middling. Like my own, most likely.

One time, we let her younger sister tag along with us to the movies. There was some reason that we had to. The film was "The Sound of Music." The theatre was packed, so we had to sit near the front, and I remember that watching that 70-mm. wide-screen film so close up made my eyes ache by the end. My girlfriend, though, was crazy about the songs in the film. She bought the soundtrack LP and listened to it endlessly. Me, I was much more into John Coltrane's magical version of "My Favorite Things," but I figured that bringing that up with her was pointless, so I never did.

Her younger sister didn't seem to

like me much. Whenever we saw each other she looked at me with strange eyes, totally devoid of emotion—as if she were judging whether some dried fish at the back of the fridge was still edible or not. And, for some reason, that look always left me feeling guilty. When she looked at me, it was as though she were ignoring the outside (granted, it wasn't much to look at anyway) and could see right through me, down to the depths of my being. I may have felt that way because I really did have shame and guilt in my heart.

My girlfriend's brother was four years older than her, so he would have been at least twenty then. She didn't introduce him to me and hardly ever mentioned him. If he happened to come up in conversation, she deftly changed the subject. I can see now that her attitude was a bit unnatural. Not that I thought much about it. I wasn't that interested in her family. What drew me to her was a much more urgent impulse.

DECEMBER

It was never supposed to snow
here, and yet
it was snowing, big flakes tearing down
over the Edwards Plateau like the sky
had crumbled. My friend and I drank

cold wine while our children played
inside with masks
on a big white bed. Another afternoon,
my daughters sang a song about lords
and camp that I didn't

understand, but they didn't like me
to ask what it meant, and
instead of answering rolled down the hill
in their pajamas. Their
first secret. Then:

first bright-red manicure, first
chipped nail, first note taped to the door
saying don't come in. I went
to the museum instead
and stared a long time

at the draft on which Anne Sexton
had scrawled "At last I found you, you funny
old story-poem!" and felt a happy

The first time I met her brother and spoke with him was toward the end of autumn in 1965.

That Sunday, I went to my girlfriend's house to pick her up. I rang the bell over and over but no one answered. I paused for a while, then rang it again, repeatedly, until I finally heard someone moving slowly toward the door. It was my girlfriend's older brother.

He was a shade taller than me and a bit on the hefty side. Not flabby but more like an athlete who, for some reason, can't exercise for a while and packs on a few extra pounds, just temporary fat. He had broad shoulders but a relatively long, thin neck. His hair was dishevelled, sticking out all over the place, as if he'd just woken up. It looked stiff and coarse, and he seemed about two weeks overdue for a haircut. He had on a crew-neck navy-blue sweater, the neck loose, and gray sweats that were baggy around the knees. His look was the complete opposite of my girlfriend's—she was always neat and clean and well groomed.

He squinted at me for a while, like some scruffy animal that had, after a long hibernation, crawled out into the sunlight.

"I'm guessing you are . . . Sayoko's friend?" He said this before I got a word out. He cleared his throat. His voice was sleepy, but I could sense a spark of interest in it.

"That's right," I said and introduced myself. "I was supposed to come here at eleven."

"Sayoko's not here right now," he said.

"Not here," I said, repeating his words.

"She's out somewhere. She's not at home."

"But I was supposed to come and pick her up today at eleven."

"Is that right?" her brother said. He glanced up at the wall beside him, as if checking a clock. But there was no clock there, just a white plaster wall. He reluctantly turned his gaze back to me. "That may be, but the fact is she's not at home."

I had no clue what I should do. And neither did her brother, apparently. He gave a leisurely yawn and scratched the back of his head. All his actions were slow and measured.

"Doesn't seem like anybody's at home now," he said. "When I got up a while ago nobody was here. They must have all gone out, but I don't know where."

I didn't say anything.

"My father's probably out golfing. My sisters must have gone out to have some fun. But my mom being out, too, is a little odd. That doesn't happen often."

I refrained from speculating. This wasn't my family.

"But, if Sayoko promised she'd be here, I'm sure she'll be back soon," her brother said. "Why don't you come inside and wait?"

"I don't want to bother you. I'll just hang out somewhere for a while and then come back," I said.

"Nah, it's no bother," he said firmly. "Much more of a bother to have the bell ring again and have to come and open the front door. So come on in."

I had no other choice, so I went inside, and he led me to the living room. The living room with the sofa on which she and I had made out in the summer. I sat down on it, and my girlfriend's

envy, happy for her
but not for me.

Then: first time on ice skates,
chick-chicking around the rink, a string
of beads draped over one daughter's head
and my gold necklace still tangled
by the sink. Snow

rolled over the prairie and held
the fence shadows when we threw
golden hay to the ponies who lived outside
all winter. The black-and-white barn cat
was still alive

and ate nervously in the garage,
where snow chains glittered on the floor. One night
I told a restaurant it was my husband's birthday
and they gave us a sundae. It was
his birthday, and at this point

we were far from the Edwards Plateau.
I can't remember when we left for that trip but I know
on the last day of December we had to go home
and in the airport, waiting for the plane, I arranged
our winter coats so that mine
was holding everyone else's.

—*Cecily Parks*

brother eased himself into an armchair facing me. And once again let out another long yawn.

"You're Sayoko's friend, right?" he asked again, as if making doubly sure.

"That's right," I said, giving the same reply.

"Not Yuko's friend?"

I shook my head. Yuko was her taller kid sister.

"Is it interesting going out with Sayoko?" her brother asked, a look of curiosity in his eyes.

I had no clue how to respond, so I stayed silent. He sat there, waiting for my reply.

"It's fun, yes," I said, finally finding what I hoped were the right words.

"It's fun, but it's not interesting?"

"No, that's not what I mean . . ." My words petered out.

"No matter," her brother said. "Interesting or fun—no difference between the two, I suppose. Hey, have you had breakfast?"

"I have, yes."

"I'm going to make some toast. Sure you don't want any?"

"No, I'm fine," I replied.

"How about coffee?"

"I'm fine."

I could have done with some coffee, but I hesitated to get more involved with my girlfriend's family, especially when she wasn't at home.

He stood up without a word and left the room. After a while, I heard the clatter of dishes and cups. I stayed there alone on the sofa, politely sitting up straight, my hands in my lap, waiting for her to come back from wherever she was. The clock now read eleven-fifteen.

I scanned my memory to see if we really had decided that I would come at eleven. But, no matter how much I thought it over, I was sure that I'd got the date and time correct. We'd talked on the phone the night before and had confirmed it then. She wasn't the type to forget or blow off a promise. And it was odd, indeed, for her and her family to all go off on a Sunday morning and leave her older brother by himself.

Puzzled by it all, I sat there patiently. Time passed excruciatingly slowly. I'd hear the occasional sound from the kitchen—the faucet turning on, the clatter of a spoon mixing something, the sound of a cupboard opening and closing. This brother seemed the type who had to make a racket, whatever he did. But that was it, as far as sounds went. No wind blowing outside, no dogs barking. Like invisible mud, the silence steadily crept into my ears and plugged them up. I had to gulp a few times to unblock them.

Some music would have been nice. "Theme from 'A Summer Place,'" "Edelweiss," "Moon River"—anything. I wasn't picky. Just some music. But I couldn't very well turn on the stereo in somebody else's house without permission. I looked around for something to read but didn't spot any newspapers or magazines. I checked out what was inside my shoulder bag. I almost always had a paperback I was reading in my bag, but not that day.

When we went on dates, my girlfriend and I often pretended that we were going to the library to study, and I put school-related items in my bag to keep up the pretense. Like an amateur criminal making up a flimsy alibi. So the only book I had in my bag that day was a supplementary reader for our school textbook "Japanese Language and Literature." I reluctantly pulled it out and started flipping through the pages. I wasn't what you'd call a *reader*, who goes through books systematically and attentively, but more the type who finds it hard to pass the time without something to read. I could never just sit, still and silent. I always had to be turning the pages of a book or listening to music, one or the other. When there was no book lying around, I'd grab anything printed. I'd read a phone book, an instruction manual for a steam iron. Compared with those kinds of reading material, a supplementary reader for a Japanese-language textbook was far better.

I randomly flipped through the fiction and essays in the book. A few pieces were by foreign authors, but most were by well-known modern Japanese writers—Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Junichiro

Tanizaki, Kobo Abe, and the like. And appended to each work—all excerpts, except for a handful of very short stories—were some questions. Most of these questions were totally meaningless. With meaningless questions, it's hard (or impossible) to determine logically if an answer is correct or not. I doubted whether whoever had come up with the questions would even have been able to decide. Things like "What can you glean from this passage about the writer's stance toward war?" or "When the author describes the waxing and waning of the moon, what sort of symbolic effect is created?" You could give almost any answer. If you said that the description of the waxing and waning of the moon was simply a description of the waxing and waning of the moon, and created no symbolic effect, no one could say with certainty that your answer was wrong. Of course there was a relatively reasonable answer, but I didn't really think that arriving at a relatively reasonable answer was one of the goals of studying literature.

Be that as it may, I killed time by trying to conjure up answers to each of these questions. And, in most cases, what sprang to mind—in my brain, which was still growing and developing, struggling every day to attain a kind of psychological independence—were the sorts of answers that were relatively unreasonable but not necessarily wrong. Maybe that tendency was one of the reasons that my grades at school were no great shakes.

While this was going on, my girlfriend's brother came back to the living room. His hair was still sticking out in all directions, but, maybe because he'd had breakfast, his eyes weren't as sleepy as before. He held a large white mug, which had a picture of a First World War German biplane, with two machine guns in front of the cockpit, printed on the side. This had to be his own special mug. I couldn't picture my girlfriend drinking from a mug like that.

"You really don't want any coffee?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No. I'm fine. Really."

His sweater was festooned with bread crumbs. The knees of his sweats, too. He had probably been starving and had gobbled down the toast without caring about crumbs going everywhere. I could imagine that bugging my girlfriend, since she always looked so neat and tidy. I liked to be neat and tidy myself, a shared quality that was part of why we got along, I think.

Her brother glanced up at the wall. There was a clock on this wall. The hands of the clock showed nearly eleven-thirty.

"She isn't back yet, is she? Where the heck could she have gone off to?"

I said nothing in response.

"What're you reading?"

"A supplementary reader for our Japanese textbook."

"Hmm," he said, inclining his head slightly. "Is it interesting?"

"Not particularly. I just don't have anything else to read."

"Could you show it to me?"

I passed him the book over the low table. Coffee cup in his left hand, he took the book with his right. I was worried that he'd spill coffee on it. That seemed about to happen. But he didn't spill. He put his cup down on the glass tabletop with a clink, and he held the book in both hands and starting flipping through.

"So what part were you reading?"

"Just now I was reading Akutagawa's story 'Spinning Gears.' There's only part of the story there, not the whole thing."

He gave this some thought. " 'Spinning Gears' is one I've never read. Though I did read his story 'Kappa' a long time ago. Isn't 'Spinning Gears' a pretty dark story?"

"It is. He wrote it right before he died." Akutagawa overdosed when he was thirty-five. My supplementary reader's notes said that "Spinning Gears" was published posthumously, in 1927. The story was almost a last will and testament.

"Hmm," my girlfriend's brother said. "D'ya think you could read it for me?"

I looked at him in surprise. "Read it aloud, you mean?"

"Yeah. I've always liked to have people read to me. I'm not such a great reader myself."

"I'm not good at reading aloud."

"I don't mind. You don't have to be good. Just read it in the right order, and that'll be fine. I mean, it doesn't look like we have anything else to do."

"It's a pretty neurotic, depressing story, though," I said.

"Sometimes I like to hear that kind of story. Like, to fight evil with evil."

He handed the book back, picked up the coffee cup with the picture of the biplane and its Iron Crosses, and took a sip. Then he sank back in his armchair and waited for the reading to begin.

That was how I ended up that Sunday reading part of Akutagawa's "Spinning Gears" to my girlfriend's eccentric older brother. I was a bit reluctant at first, but I warmed to the job. The supplementary reader had the two final sections of the story—"Red Lights" and "Airplane"—but I just read "Airplane." It was about eight pages long, and it ended with the line "Won't someone be good enough to strangle me as I sleep?" Akutagawa killed himself right after writing this line.

I finished reading, but still no one in the family had come home. The phone didn't ring, and no crows cawed outside. It was perfectly still all around. The autumn sunlight lit up the living room through the lace curtains. Time alone made its slow, steady way forward. My girlfriend's brother sat there, arms folded, eyes shut, as if savoring the final lines I'd read: "I don't have the strength to go on writing. It is painful beyond words to keep living when I feel like this. Won't someone be good enough to strangle me as I sleep?"

Whether you liked the writing or not, one thing was clear: this wasn't the right story to read on a bright, clear Sunday. I closed the book and glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was just past twelve.

"There must have been some kind of misunderstanding," I said. "I think I'll be going." I started to get up from the sofa. My mother had drummed it into me from childhood that you shouldn't bother people at home when it was time to have a meal. For better or for worse, this had seeped into my being and become a reflexive habit.

"You've come all this way, so how

about waiting another thirty minutes?" her brother asked. "How about you wait another thirty minutes, and if she's not back by then you can leave?"

His words were oddly distinct, and I sat back down and rested my hands in my lap again.

"You're very good at reading aloud," he said, sounding genuinely impressed. "Has anybody ever told you that?"

I shook my head.

"Unless you really grasp the content, you can't read like you did. The last part was especially good."

"Oh," I answered vaguely. I felt my cheeks redden a bit. The praise seemed misdirected, and it made me uncomfortable. But the sense I was getting was that I was in for another thirty minutes of conversation with him. He seemed to need someone to talk to.

He placed his palms firmly together in front of him, as if praying, then suddenly came out with this: "This might sound like a weird question, but have you ever had your memory stop?"

"Stop?"

"What I'm talking about is, like, from one point in time to the next you can't remember at all where you were, or what you were doing."

I shook my head. "I don't think I've ever had that."

"So you remember the time sequence and details of what you've done?"

"If it's something that happened recently, yes, I'd say so."

"Hmm," he said and scratched the back of his head for a moment, and then spoke. "I suppose that's normal."

I waited for him to continue.

"Actually, I've had several times where my memory has just slipped away. Like at 3 P.M. my memory cuts out, and the next thing I know it's 7 P.M. And I can't remember where I was, or what I was doing, during those four hours. And it's not like something special happened to me. Like I got hit on the head or got sloppy drunk or anything. I'm just doing my usual thing and without warning my memory cuts out. I can't predict when it's going to happen. And I have no clue for how many hours, how many days, even, my memory will vanish."

"I see," I murmured, to let him know I was following along.

"Imagine you've recorded a Mozart symphony on a tape recorder. And when you play it back the sound jumps from the middle of the second movement to the middle of the third, and what should be in between has just vanished. That's what it's like. When I say 'vanished' I don't mean that there's a silent section of tape. It's just gone. Do you get what I'm saying?"

"I guess so," I said in an uncertain tone.

"If it's music, it's kind of inconvenient, but no real harm, right? But, if it happens in your real life, then it's a pain, believe me. . . . You get what I mean?"

I nodded.

"You go to the dark side of the moon and come back empty-handed."

I nodded again. I wasn't sure I completely grasped the analogy.

"It's caused by a genetic disorder, and clear-cut cases like mine are pretty rare. One person out of tens of thousands will have the disorder. And even then there'll be differences among them, of course. In my last year of junior high, I was examined by a neurologist at the university hospital. My mom took me."

He paused, then went on: "In other words, it's a condition where the sequence of your memory gets messed up. One part of your memory gets stashed away in the wrong drawer. And it's next to impossible, or actually impossible, to ever find it again. That's how they explained it to me. It's not the kind of terrible disorder that can be fatal, or where you gradually lose your mind. But it does cause problems in daily life. They told me the name of the disorder and gave me some medication to take, but the pills don't do a thing. They're just a placebo."

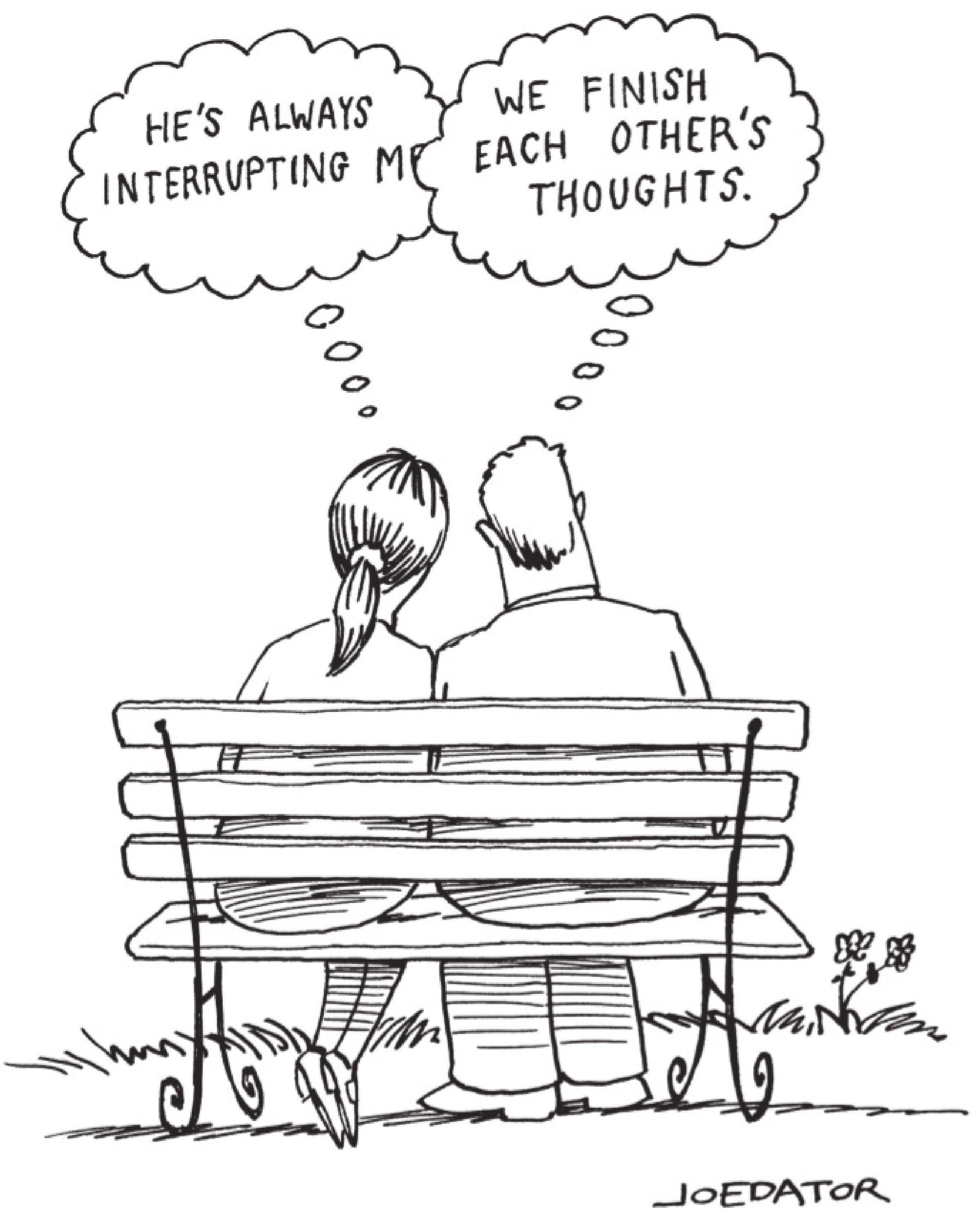
For a moment, my girlfriend's brother was silent, studying me closely to see whether I understood. It was as if he were outside a house staring in through a window.

"I have these episodes once or twice a year now," he finally said. "Not so often, but the frequency isn't the issue. When it happens it causes real problems. Even if it's only seldom, it's pretty awful having that kind of memory loss and not knowing *when* it'll happen. You get that, right?"

"Uh-huh," I said vaguely. It was all I could do to follow his odd, rapid-fire story.

"Like, say it happens to me, my memory suddenly cuts out, and during

RUSH-HOUR TURNSTILE CHICKEN
C4J.



that lapse I take a huge hammer and bash somebody's head in, somebody I don't like. No way you can just write that off by saying, 'Well, now, that's awkward.' Am I right?"

"I'd say so."

"The cops'll get involved and if I tell them, 'The thing is, my memory flew away,' they're not going to buy that, now, are they?"

I shook my head.

"There are actually a couple of people I don't like at all. Guys who really piss me off. My dad's one of them. But when I'm lucid I'm not about to bash my dad on the head with a hammer, am I? I'm able to control myself. But, when my memory cuts out, I have no clue what I'm doing."

I inclined my head a fraction, withholding any opinion.

"The doctor said there's no danger of that happening. It's not like, while my memory's gone, somebody hijacks my personality. Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I'm always myself. It's just that that recorded part skips from the middle of the second movement to the middle of the third. I'm always able to control who I am, and act normally for the most part. Mozart doesn't suddenly transform into Stravinsky. Mozart remains Mozart—it's just that one part disappears into a drawer somewhere."

He clammed up at this point and took a sip from his biplane coffee cup. I was wishing I could have some coffee myself.

"At least, that's what the doctor told me. But you gotta take what doctors tell you with a grain of salt. When I was in high school it scared the crap out of me, thinking I might, when I didn't know what I was doing, bash one of my classmates on the head with a hammer. I mean, when you're in high school you still don't know who you are, right? Add the pain of memory loss to that and you can't stand it."

I nodded silently. He might be right.

"I pretty much stopped going to school because of all that," my girlfriend's brother went on. "The more I thought about it, the more frightened I got, and I couldn't bring myself to go to school. My mom explained the situation to my teacher, and even though I had way too many absences, they made an exception for me and let me graduate. I imagine the school wanted to get rid of a problem student like me as soon as it could. But I didn't go on to college. My grades weren't so bad, and I could have got into some kind of college, but I didn't have the confidence to go out. Ever since then, I've been loafing around at home. I take the dog for a walk, but otherwise I hardly ever leave the house. These days I don't feel as panicky, or whatever. If things calm down a little more, I think maybe I'll start going to college."

He was silent then, and so was I. I had no idea what to say. I understood now why my girlfriend never wanted to talk about her brother.

"Thank you for reading that story to me," he said. " 'Spinning Gears' is pretty good. A dark story for sure, but some of the writing really got to me. You sure you don't want any coffee? It'll just take a minute."

"No, I'm fine, really. I'd better be going soon."

He glanced again at the clock on the wall. "Why don't you wait till one, and if nobody's back by then you can leave. I'll be in my room upstairs, so you can see yourself out. No need to worry about me."

I nodded.

"Is it interesting, going out with Sayoko?" my girlfriend's brother asked me one more time.

I nodded. "It's interesting."

"What part?"

"How there's so much about her I don't know," I replied. A very honest answer, I think.

"Hmm," he said, mulling it over. "Now that you mention it, I can see that. She's my kid sister, blood-related, the same genes and all, and we've been living together under the same roof since she was born, but there are still tons of things I don't understand about her. I don't get her—how should I put it? What makes her tick? So I'd like it if you could understand those things for me. Though there may be things it's best not to try to figure out."

Coffee cup in hand, he rose from the armchair.

"Anyway, give it your best shot," my girlfriend's brother said. He fluttered his free hand at me and left the room.

"Thanks," I said.

At one, there was still no sign of anyone returning, so I went alone to the front door, slipped on my sneakers, and left. I walked past the pine forest to the station, jumped on the train, and went home. It was an oddly still and quiet Sunday autumn afternoon.

I got a call from my girlfriend after 2 P.M. "You were supposed to come next Sunday," she said. I wasn't totally convinced, but she was so clear about it that she was probably right. I meekly apologized for going to her place a whole week early.

I didn't mention that while I was waiting for her to come home her brother and I had a conversation—maybe "conversation" wasn't the right word, since I basically just listened to him. I figured it was probably best not to say that I'd read Ryunosuke Akutagawa's "Spinning Gears" to him, and that he had revealed to me that he had an illness with memory lapses. If he hadn't told her these things, there wasn't any reason for me to.

Eighteen years later, I met her brother again. It was the middle of October. I was thirty-five then, living in Tokyo with my wife. My work kept me busy and I hardly ever went back to Kobe.

It was late afternoon, and I was walking up a hill in Shibuya to pick up a watch that was being repaired. I was heading along, lost in thought, when a man I'd passed turned and called out to me.

"Excuse me," he said. He had an unmistakable Kansai intonation. I stopped, turned around, and saw a man I didn't recognize. He looked a little older than me, and a tad taller. He had on a thick gray tweed jacket, a crew-neck, cream-colored cashmere sweater, and brown chinos. His hair was short, and he had the taut build of an athlete and a deep tan (a golf tan, it looked like). His features were unrefined yet still attractive. Handsome, I suppose. I got the sense that this was a man who was pleased with his life. A well-bred person was my guess.

"I don't recall your name, but weren't you my younger sister's boyfriend for a while?" he said.

I studied his face again. But I had no memory of it.

"Your younger sister?"

"Sayoko," he said. "I think you guys were in the same class in high school."

My eyes came to rest on a small tomato-sauce stain on the front of his cream-colored sweater. He was neatly dressed, and that one tiny stain struck me as out of place. And then it hit me—the brother with sleepy eyes and a loose-necked navy-blue sweater sprinkled with bread crumbs.

"I remember now," I said. "You're Sayoko's older brother. We met one time at your home, didn't we?"

"Right you are. You read Akutagawa's 'Spinning Gears' to me."

I laughed. "But I'm surprised you could pick me out in this crowd. We only met once, and it was so long ago."

"I'm not sure why, but I never forget a face. Plus, you don't seem to have changed at all."

"But you've changed quite a lot," I said. "You look so different now."

"Well—a lot of water under the bridge," he said, smiling. "As you know, things were pretty complicated for me for a while."

"How is Sayoko doing?" I asked.

He cast a troubled look to one side, breathed in slowly, then exhaled. As if measuring the density of the air around him.

"Instead of standing here in the street, why don't we go somewhere where we can sit down and talk? If you're not busy, that is," he said.

"I have nothing pressing," I told him.

"Sayoko passed away," he said quietly. We were in a nearby coffee shop, seated across a plastic table from each other.

"Passed away?"

"She died. Three years ago."

I was speechless. I felt as if my tongue were swelling up inside my mouth. I tried to swallow the saliva that had built up, but couldn't.

The last time I'd seen Sayoko she was twenty and had just got her driver's license, and she drove the two of us to the top of Mt. Rokko, in Kobe, in a white Toyota Crown hardtop that belonged to her father. Her driving was still a bit awkward, but she looked elated as she drove. Predictably, the radio was playing a Beatles song. I remember it well. "Hello, Goodbye." *You say goodbye, and I say hello.* As I said before, their music was everywhere then.

I couldn't grasp the fact that she'd died and no longer existed in this world. I'm not sure how to put it—it seemed so surreal.

"How did she . . . die?" I asked, my mouth dry.

"She committed suicide," he said, as if carefully picking his words. "When she was twenty-six she married a colleague at the insurance company she worked at, then had two children, then took her life. She was just thirty-two."

"She left behind children?"

My former girlfriend's brother nodded. "The older one is a boy, the younger a girl. Her husband's taking care of them. I visit them every once in a while. Great kids."

I still had trouble following the reality of it all. My former girlfriend had killed herself, leaving behind two small children?

"Why did she do it?"

He shook his head. "Nobody knows why. She didn't act like she was troubled or depressed. Her health was good, things seemed good between her and her husband, and she loved her kids. And she didn't leave behind a note or anything. Her doctor had prescribed sleeping pills, and she saved them up and took them all at once. So it does seem as though she was planning to kill herself. She wanted to die, and for six months she stashed away the medicine bit by bit. It wasn't just a sudden impulse."

I was silent for quite a while. And so was he. Each of us lost in our own thoughts.

On that day, in a café at the top of Mt. Rokko, my girlfriend and I broke up. I was going to a college in Tokyo and had fallen in love with a girl there. I came right out and confessed all this, and she, saying barely a word, grabbed her handbag, stood up, and hurried out of the café, without so much as a glance back.

I had to take the cable car down the mountain alone. She must have driven that white Toyota Crown home. It was a gorgeous, sunny day, and I remember I could see all of Kobe through the window of the gondola. It was an amazing view.

Sayoko went on to college, got a job at a major insurance company, married one of her colleagues, had two children, saved up sleeping pills, and took her own life.

I would have broken up with her sooner or later. But, still, I have very fond memories of the years we spent together. She was my first girlfriend, and I liked her a lot. She was the person who taught me about the female body. We experienced all sorts of new things together, and shared some wonderful times, the kind that are possible only when you're in your teens.

It's hard for me to say this now, but she never rang that special bell inside my ears. I listened as hard as I could, but never once did it ring. Sadly. The girl I knew in Tokyo was the one who did it for me. This isn't something you can choose freely, according to logic or morality. Either it happens or it doesn't. When it does, it happens of its own accord, in your consciousness or in a spot deep in your soul.

"You know," my former girlfriend's brother said, "it never crossed my mind, not once, that Sayoko would commit suicide. Even if everybody in the whole world had killed themselves, I figured—wrongly, it turns out—she'd still be standing, alive and well. I couldn't see her as the type to be disillusioned or have some darkness hidden away inside. Honestly, I thought she was a bit shallow. I never paid much attention to her, and the same was true for her when it came to me, I think. Maybe we just weren't on the same wavelength. . . . Actually, I got along better with my other sister. But now I feel as though I did something awful to Sayoko, and it pains me. Maybe I never really knew her. Never understood a thing about her. Maybe I was too preoccupied with my own life. Perhaps somebody like me didn't have the strength to save her life, but I should have been able to understand something about her, even if it wasn't much. It's hard to bear now. I was so arrogant, so self-centered."

There was nothing I could say. I probably hadn't understood her at all, either. Like him, I'd been too preoccupied with my own life.

My former girlfriend's brother said, "In that story you read me back then, Akutagawa's 'Spinning Gears,' there was a part about how a pilot breathes in the air way up in the sky and then can't stand breathing the air back here on earth anymore. . . . 'Airplane disease,' they called it. I don't know if that's a real disease or not, but I still remember those lines."

"Did you get over that condition where your memory flies away sometimes?" I asked him. I think I wanted to change the subject away from Sayoko.

"Oh, right. That," he said, narrowing his eyes a bit. "It's kind of weird, but that just spontaneously went away. It's a genetic disorder and it should have got worse over time, the doctor said, but it just up and vanished, as if I'd never had it. As if an evil spirit had been expelled."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said. And I really was.

"It happened not long after that time I met you. After that, I never experienced that kind of memory loss, not even once. I felt calmer, I was able to enter a halfway decent college, graduate, and then take over my dad's business. Things took a detour for a few years there, but now I'm just living an ordinary life."

"I'm glad to hear that," I repeated. "So you didn't wind up bashing your father over the head with a hammer."

"You remember some dumb things, too, don't you," he said, and laughed out loud. "Still, you know, I don't come to Tokyo on business very often, and it seems strange to bump into you like this in this huge city. I can't help but feel that something brought us together."

"For sure," I said.

"So how about you? Have you been living in Tokyo all this time?"

"I got married right after I graduated from college," I told him, "and have been living here in Tokyo ever since. I'm making a living of sorts as a writer now."

"A writer?"

"Yeah. After a fashion."

"Well, you were really great at reading aloud," he said. "It might be a burden to you for me to tell you this, but I think Sayoko always liked you best of all."

I didn't reply. And my ex-girlfriend's brother didn't say anything more.

And so we said goodbye. I went to get my watch, which had been repaired, and my former girlfriend's older brother slowly set off down the hill to Shibuya station. His tweed-jacketed figure was swallowed up in the afternoon crowd.

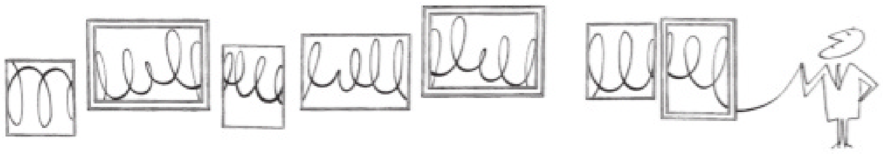
I never saw him again. Chance had brought us together a second time. With nearly twenty years between encounters, in cities three hundred miles apart, we'd sat, a table between us, sipping coffee and talking over a few things. But these weren't subjects you just chatted about over coffee. There was something more significant in our talk, something that seemed meaningful to us, in the act of living out our lives. Still, it was merely a hint, delivered by chance. There was nothing to link us together in a more systematic or organic way. (Question: *What elements in the lives of these two men were symbolically suggested by their two meetings and conversations*?)

I never saw that lovely young girl again, either, the one who was holding the LP "With the Beatles." Sometimes I wonder—is she still hurrying down that dimly lit high-school hallway in 1964, the hem of her skirt fluttering as she goes? Sixteen even now, holding that wonderful album cover with the half-lit photo of John, Paul, George, and Ringo, clutching it tightly as though her life depended on it. ♦

(Translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel.)

NEWYORKER.COM
Haruki Murakami on memory and story.

THE CRITICS



ON TELEVISION

THROWBACK THURSDAY

Hulu’s “High Fidelity” and Freeform’s “Party of Five.”

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX

Halfway through the fourth episode of the Hulu television series “High Fidelity,” a new adaptation of Nick Hornby’s 1995 novel, Robin (Rob) Brooks, played by Zoë Kravitz, monologues to the camera as she stomps, dead-eyed and heartsick, down a Brooklyn block to her local bodega. At the counter, the do-ragged clerk, young and brown, looks at her. “You’re wearing lipstick,” he says. “No,” Rob scoffs, pursing her lips, which are conspicuously red. We are to understand that Rob, the sulky owner of the record store Championship Vinyl, who is on her way to meet an ex, a lesbian influencer named Kat, is more eager to please than she’d like others to believe. But, as the lighting softens and the camera zooms in on Rob’s face, something else has happened, too. The sequence has become a luxury advertisement.

I’d seen Kravitz lit and her mouth painted like that before, up and down my Instagram feed, as the face of Y.S.L. Beauty. Was this a plug? What matters more is that it felt like one. “High Fidelity” is look-book television—an accretion of interestingly composed set pieces that are designed to have second lives as mood-board fodder. Hornby’s book was set in nineties London; Stephen Frears’s 2000 film adaptation moved the action to Chicago. The television series was shot in Brooklyn, and never has Greenpoint or Crown Heights looked so dreamily spruced. Brooklynite viewers could play a drinking game called Spot the Bedford Avenue Establishment.

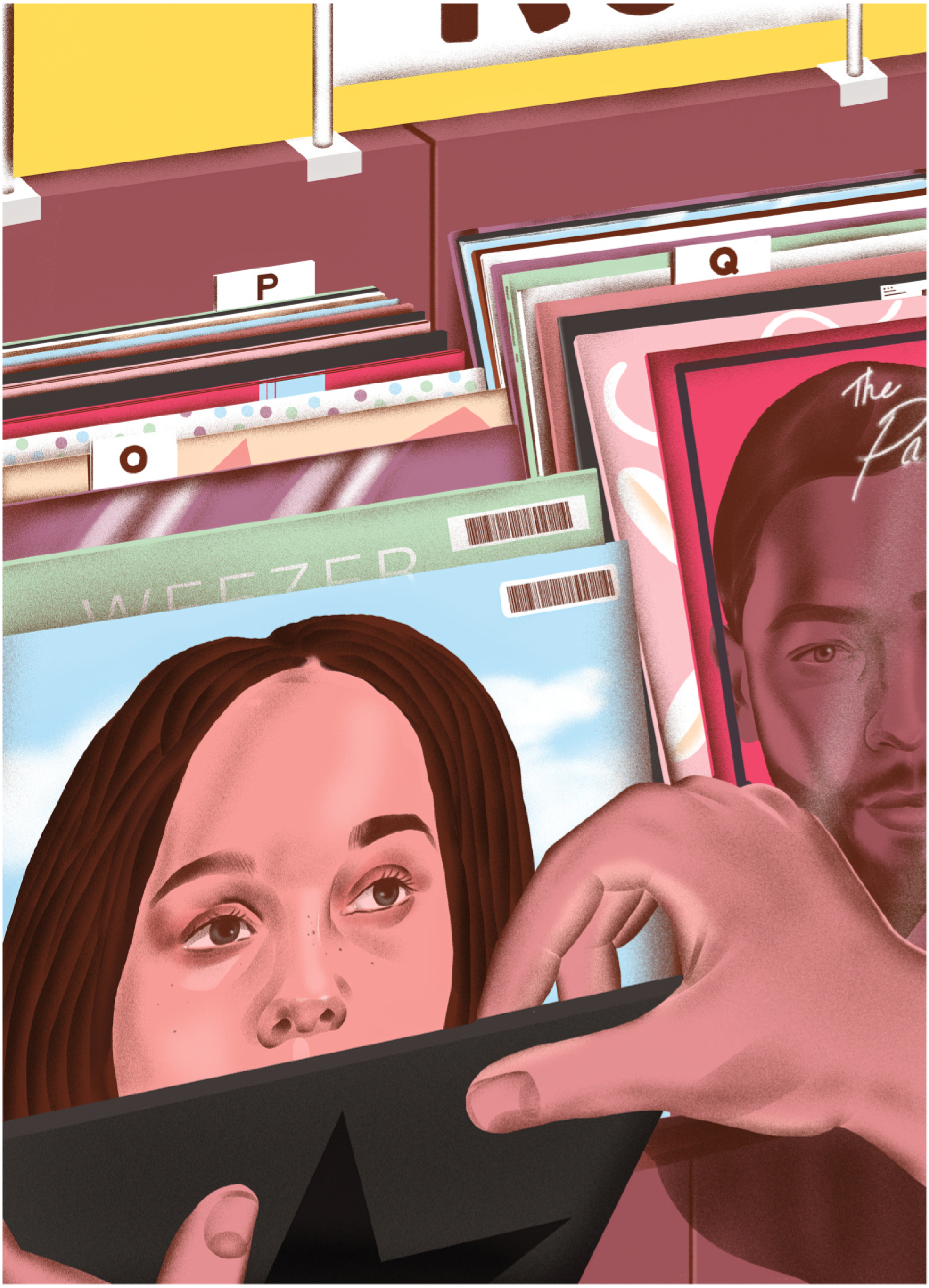
Months before the trailer dropped, shots of Kravitz on set were already populating Instagram fan accounts. One featured her sitting on a brownstone stoop, eyes narrowed, wearing a pleated schoolgirl skirt and an oversized Dickies-logo T—a riff on the Dickies shirt and black pants worn by John Cusack as Rob Gordon in the movie. On Cusack, the clothes illustrated Rob’s avoidance of style, which is its own mode of self-presentation; a wannabe counterculturist, he compulsively catalogues women the way he does his records. But while Rob Gordon possesses a complete world view, one contemptuously defined in relation to the flow of the mainstream, Rob Brooks does not—not yet, at least. On Kravitz, the outfit is the uniform of a street-style maven. She also wears tiny sunglasses like his.

The new “High Fidelity,” like women-led reboots of other male-oriented franchises—“Ghostbusters” and “Ocean’s Eight” come to mind—is less a reinvention than a reverential kind of drag show. The “Ugly Betty” creators Sarah Kucserka and Veronica West spearheaded the adaptation; Hornby is credited as an executive producer and Scott Rosenberg, who co-wrote the film’s screenplay with Cusack, is a producer and writer. Like the movie, the show opens with a closeup on Rob listing her top five heartbreaks straight to the camera. (Where Cusack seethed, Kravitz weeps.) Before she can tell us who is responsible for the fifth, the frame expands, and we meet him—Mac (Kingsley Ben-Adir)—as he prepares to leave her apartment, for good. Other scenes that mirror the film—Rob, in the rain, yelling up to Kat’s apartment; Rob having delightfully rude interactions with customers—similarly have the feel of elaborate fan fiction.

In its staccato editing, and its occasional surreal turns—Debbie Harry makes a fun appearance in one of Rob’s fantasies—“High Fidelity” sometimes resembles a pastiche of recent New York City shows: “Girls,” “Ramy,” “Search Party,” and Natasha Lyonne’s “Russian Doll.” (Lyonne directs Episode 6 of “High Fidelity.”) But, whereas in those shows the city serves the plot, “High Fidelity” is too simpatico with privileged Brooklyn bohemia to satirize it more than intermittently. Rob is notionally depressed; she eats Indian takeout in the bathtub and sleeps with a Scottish musician ten years her junior. (His counterpart in the film was Marie de Salle, played by Lisa Bonet, Kravitz’s mother.) A smarter series would have worked with Kravitz’s utter inability to appear anything less than glamorous. Instead, in Episode 7, Rob’s brother, Cameron (Rainbow Sun Francks), drunk and coked out, taunts his sister, who’s wearing a vintage Boy Scout shirt: “You’re dressed like a little boy!” As if all the hot girls in Brooklyn weren’t dressed like little boys.

At Championship Vinyl, Rob’s co-workers, Simon and Cherise, watch, bemused, as she embarks on a quest of tracking down her exes, to understand why they rejected her. I became invested in the finely sketched relationship between Rob and Mac; through its dissolution, we get a believable portrait of Rob’s cowardice. The other breakups, explained through hectic flashbacks, were less compelling. Still, I remained curious about the satirical possibilities of “High Fidelity,” the question of what it might mean for a young woman to define herself as a harridan who rails against pop culture. Which phenomena would she endorse, and which would repulse her? Would

ABOVE: SERGE BLOCH



In the new "High Fidelity," scenes that mirror the film, from 2000, have the feel of elaborate fan fiction.

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she dismiss Billie Eilish as conformist? Is she too stuck up for Saweetie?

It’s difficult to know. In Rob’s monologues, she speaks elegiacally of the thrill of record hunting, but the show’s musical references are hardly obscure. The music supervisors (and Questlove, who was a consultant for the series) have Rob listening to Lauryn Hill one minute, David Bowie the next. In a scene set at the Carlyle hotel, she chews out a fellow record enthusiast, an older white man, correcting him on the date of a Paul McCartney & Wings album. The exchange teases a sort of revanchist manifesto—Rob Brooks upbraiding a Rob Gordon type—and her companion, a nice white-guy fling named Clyde (Jake Lacy), eyes her expectantly, as if begging for the raging subtext to break the surface. It never does.

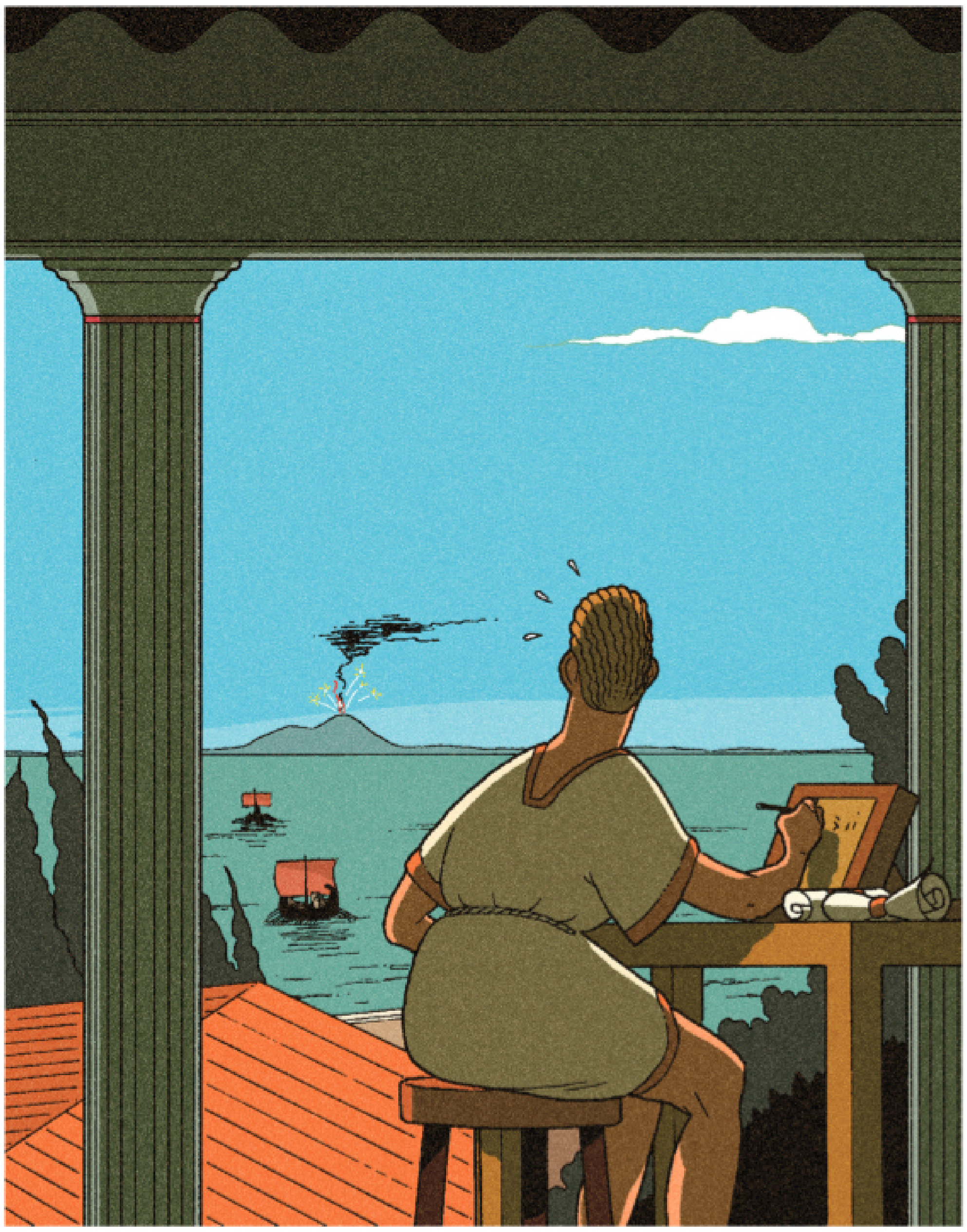
Curiously, “High Fidelity” is unfashionably race-blind. It tends to launch signifiers of racial awareness but backs away from giving Rob a racial consciousness. Recalling her tumultuous relationship with Kat, she complains that Kat preferred white girls. The fact that all but one of Rob’s exes are white—and that Mac, too, ends up engaged to a white woman, who posts photos of frosé on social media—is never explored. Something simmers between Cherise (Da’Vine Joy Randolph, who deserves better than her treacly arc) and Rob, the show’s only two black women. At one point, after Rob warns Cherise against “talking smack” to her, Cherise retorts with an intriguingly cutting barb. “ ‘Talking smack,’ Robin?” she asks. “I bet you feel extra black today.” The tension clearly springs from history, personal and otherwise, but, once again, the static instantly smooths.

I loved the eighth episode, “Simon’s Top Five,” written by the comedian Solomon Georgio, which takes its opening scene from Episode 7, with Rob, Cherise, and Simon closing up shop—and then lets Simon (David H. Holmes) take over the narration. Simon, we know, had been responsible for one of Rob’s heartbreaks; since coming out to her, he’s been her platonic supporter. He is his own man. “Want to know about that knot in your heart, the putrid taste in your mouth that leaves you unable to speak?” he says to the camera, as he walks hurriedly to his apartment. Then he lists his top five: the same name, five times—Ben, a lawyer whom we meet in tenderly written flashbacks. The storytelling is confident and graceful. “I wish I’d known it wasn’t gonna last,” Simon says. “I would’ve enjoyed it more.”

Viewers will not yearn to dress like any of the five Acosta children in the Freeform remake of “Party of Five,” another nineties landmark, which débuted in early January. Powerfully uncool—the kids wear flared jeans, tight Henley shirts, and shag haircuts—the reboot is justified instead by a kernel of social emergency; Christopher Keyser and Amy Lippman, who created the original, started developing the new series in 2016. Whereas the original siblings, the middle-class white Salingers of San Francisco, enter the adult world after their parents are killed in a car accident, the Acostas, Mexican-Americans living in a city resembling Los Angeles, are made de-facto orphans after ICE agents descend on the family restaurant.

With their parents violently removed from their lives, the children must keep the business afloat and learn to raise one another and their youngest brother, the baby, Rafa. Emilio, a DACA recipient and womanizing musician (the counterpart of Matthew Fox’s Charlie), straightens up, moves back home, and appoints himself the disciplinarian. The high-achieving Lucia starts acting out, throwing house parties. Beto, a block-headed athlete, skips classes to help run the restaurant. Valentina, the youngest sister, a precocious middle schooler, mimics adult talk in a way that is melancholic, imbued with tragic double meaning: “One of these days, I’ll be gone, and then what are you gonna do?” she asks a sibling.

It’s “issues” television—each episode imparts a moral lesson. There is way too much acoustic guitar. The Trump Administration is never mentioned. The closest thing to political commentary is provided by Lucia, who occasionally curses “this country.” Visiting her parents at the detention center shortly before they are deported, she begins to disintegrate, picking a fight with an agent. Her father reprimands her: “Dignity, *mija!*” The dynamic, though swiftly drawn, is an honest portrayal of so many immigrant families: the parent made obeisant by his circumstances; the daughter indignant and enlarged by her rage and relative entitlement. It won’t go viral, but “Party of Five” has heart. ♦



Pliny the Younger witnessed the eruption that killed his uncle, Pliny the Elder.

BOOKS

THE DAY THE EARTH EXPLODED

Vesuvius and the Plinys.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

If you were writing a biography of Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus—or Pliny the Younger, the author of one of the most famous collections of letters surviving from the early Roman Empire—it would be hard not to start with the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, on the Bay of Naples, in 79 A.D., for Pliny was the only writer to leave us an eyewitness account of the catastrophe. The English classicist Daisy Dunn, in her book "The Shadow of Vesuvius: A Life of Pliny" (Liveright), wisely does not resist the temptation. For Westerners, that explosion is probably the paradigmatic natural disaster. When we think of the worst thing Mother Nature could do to us, we are likely to think of Vesuvius. Likewise, Pompeii, the hardest hit of the communities lying at the base of the volcano, is, for many people, the world's most compelling archeological site. Although some two thousand of the town's inhabitants were killed, much of their world—the tools they gardened with, the paving stones they walked on, the graffiti they scratched on the walls of their brothels ("Posphorus fucked here"), the loaves of bread left baking in the oven, marked off into eight portions, just like a modern pizza—survived, however altered, under the layers of ash and pumice and rock that the volcano dumped on it.

Today, these things stand as a kind of textbook of how the citizens of Campania, the region over which Vesuvius loomed, lived in the late first century. Who, before the excavations of Pompeii, knew that many ordinary Romans, having only small, rudimentary kitchens, seem to have eaten takeout for dinner? But if you go to Pompeii, as millions of tourists do each year, you can view the storefront food shops with the pots, sunk in their counters, that once contained fish stews, boiled lentils, and so on, ready to be bought and carried home.

And who, apart from those who have survived a war, knew what a person dying from thermal shock looked like? Archeologists examining Pompeii and neighboring cities eventually came upon rooms full of skeletons, many of them surrounded by a bubble of empty space, which marked the outline of the victims' flesh. At a town just south of Vesuvius, known in ancient times as Oplontis, you can see the so-called Resin Lady, a facsimile created by pumping transparent epoxy resin into such a void. The Resin Lady is lying face down and spread-eagled, just as she was when she was found. Around her are the objects she was carrying when she died: some jewelry, an iron key (to what?), the traces of a cloth bag holding a small collection of coins, five silver and seven bronze. Apparently she thought that, wherever she was going, she might need money. Her mouth is open, in a silent scream. In front of this, one turns away, ashamed of having looked.

There is more, at least quantitatively. Herculaneum, on the coast, lay upwind from Vesuvius, giving the inhabitants time to seek shelter from the blast. Hundreds of people, Dunn writes, "made their way to the shore, where a series of arched vaults, probably boat stores, was set back from the coast." Each vault was barely ten feet wide by thirteen feet deep. The people who could not fit inside one of the vaults—many men ceded their places to women and children—remained exposed on the shore. A recent study suggests that those in the shelters may in fact have met slower and more agonizing deaths, perhaps by asphyxiation, than

ILLUSTRATION BY R. FRESSON

those outside, who were probably killed instantly by the heat. Other researchers have identified some glassy black material found in Herculaneum as the brain matter of one of the victims, vitrified by the eruption's pyroclastic flow—burning clouds of gas and ash. As this avalanche poured down on the coast at a speed of at least sixty miles an hour, the temperature on the ground rose to about seven hundred and fifty degrees Fahrenheit. Lead melts at six hundred and twenty-one degrees Fahrenheit.

The terrible day dawned prettily. Pliny the Younger, seventeen years old, was staying at a villa in Misenum, across the Bay of Naples from Vesuvius, with his mother, Plinia, and her brother, Gaius Plinius Secundus, usually known as Pliny the Elder. (I will call the nephew Pliny, and the uncle the Elder.) Plinia was the first to notice that something strange was going on across the bay. Atop Vesuvius, there was a cloud that looked like an umbrella pine, Dunn says, "for it was raised high on a kind of very tall trunk and spread out into branches."

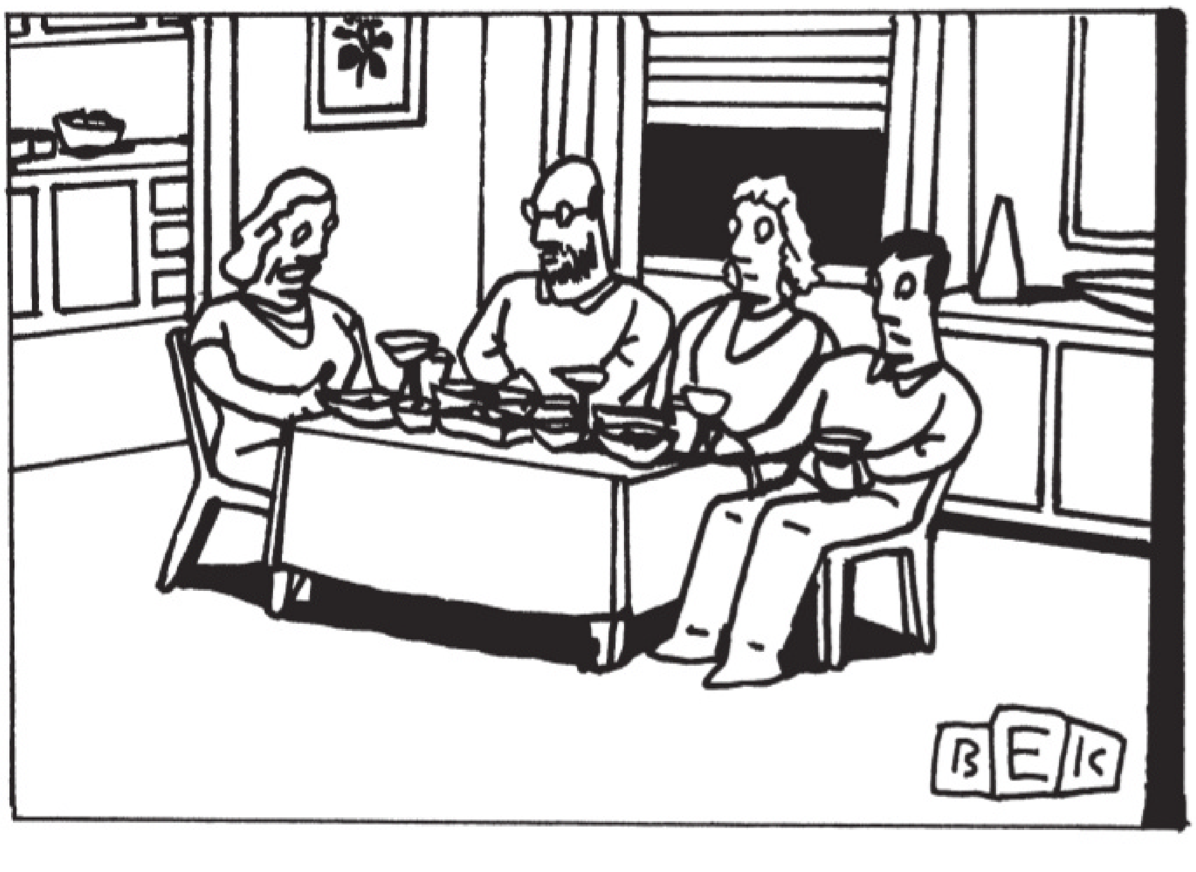
Plinia went into the house and spoke to her brother. The Elder was the admiral of Rome's navy, which, at that time, was docked at Misenum. He put down his book and called for his shoes, so that he could climb to a higher vantage point and see what was happening.

The Elder, who was fifty-five, was not just a military man. He was also a naturalist—the greatest, perhaps, that the ancient world produced. He proudly claimed that his thirty-seven volume "Natural History" contained facts gleaned not just from observation but from as many as two thousand volumes by Greek and Roman geographers, botanists, physicians, artists, and philosophers. In the book, he described his homeland, Campania, as a blessed spot, with

> plains so fertile, hills so sunny, glades so safe, woods so rich in shade, so many bountiful kinds of forest, so many mountain breezes, such fertility of crops and vines and olives, fleeces of sheep so handsome, bulls with such excellent necks, so many lakes, and rivers and springs which are so abundant in their flow, so many seas and ports, the bosom of its lands open to commerce on all sides and running out into the sea with such eagerness to help mankind!

The fertility of the region's vineyards was famous. Some said that this was because of soil enriched by volcanic explosions, but Vesuvius had been dormant for around seven hundred years. Who remembered? There were frequent earthquakes in the area, but people were used to this. They didn't suspect that it was owing to anything going on inside their noble mountain.

When the Elder saw the strange cloud over Vesuvius, he decided to set sail across the bay to see what was going on. Although he gave the appearance of being unworried, he launched several quadriremes—large warships with two banks of oars, each oar pulled by two men—presumably with the thought of evacuating as many people as possible. He asked his nephew to come with him, but Pliny said he had some writing to do and would rather stay home. The Elder's boats aimed straight for Vesuvius but couldn't land there, because the debris from the eruption was falling so fast that it formed islands in the shallows. So the fleet turned toward Stabiae, a port nine miles south, and there the Elder went ashore, to the house of a friend, Pomponianus. Thinking (so Pliny conjectures) to set an example of calm, he asked for a bath and dinner. Even as flames began leaping from the mountain, he told his companions that these were surely just burning houses abandoned by frightened peasants, and he went off to take a nap. But, during the night, Pomponianus' family, feeling the house sway above them, decided it was time to leave and woke their guest. The party strapped pillows over their heads to protect themselves, and made a run for it. The Elder headed to the shore, hoping that he might find some way to escape by sea.



"I just threw a little olive oil in the pan, then chopped and cooked and cleaned for hours and hours and hours."

Back in Misenum, meanwhile, Pliny and his mother decided that they, too, had to escape. They tried to go by carriage, but the roads were clogged with other people fleeing, so they got out and ran. The darkness was complete: "Not so much a moonless or cloudy night, but as if the lamp had gone out in a locked room," Pliny wrote. Plinia begged her son to leave her and go on alone, but he refused. The two eventually found their way to safety. The Elder, on the opposite shore, did not. When the darkness lifted, his body was found on the beach. He was heavyset and had a weak windpipe. He probably died of asphyxiation from the ash. Dust from the explosion reached all the way to Africa, Pliny writes.

Of the two Plinys, Dunn focusses on the younger. Clearly, she would rather have done otherwise. The Elder was more famous, rightfully so. As his nephew said, the older man did things that deserved to be written about and wrote things that deserved to be read. His "Natural History"—Penguin Classics has a good abridged translation, by

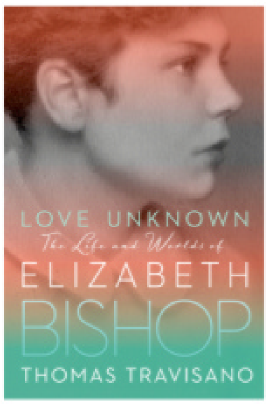
John F. Healy—is not merely huge but piquant and readable. Of bees, for example, he writes:

> The bees have a wonderful way of supervising their work-load: they note the idleness of slackers, reprove them and later even punish them with death. Their hygiene is amazing: everything is moved out of the way and no refuse is left in their work areas. Indeed the droppings of those working in the hive are heaped up in one place so that the bees do not have to go too far away. They carry out the droppings on stormy days when they have to interrupt work.
>
> As evening draws in, the buzzing inside the hive diminishes until one bee flies round, as though giving the order for "lights out," and makes the same loud buzzing with which reveille was sounded, just as if the hive were a military camp. Then suddenly all becomes silent.

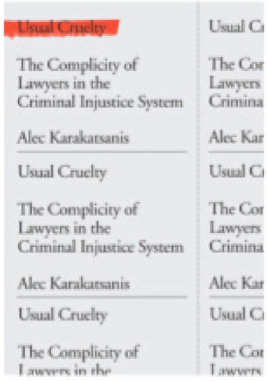
How wonderfully, punctiliously factual that is, but also with a subtle moral. Reading the Elder's work, you come to feel that you know him. In fact, however, he told us almost nothing about himself.

That, no doubt, is the reason that Dunn chose to concentrate not on him but on his nephew. Pliny's letters, as published in his lifetime, ran to nine volumes, and a tenth was added after his death. (Here, too, there's a Penguin Classics abridged edition, this one translated by Betty Radice.) In them, we learn pretty much everything about this man's public life, and also a lot about the other well-placed Romans whom he corresponded with, such as the historians Tacitus and Suetonius, not to speak of the emperors he served, Domitian and Trajan. Pliny went to work as a lawyer at the age of eighteen, and he had other vocations as well. He was a poet, a senator, a public official. But in all his jobs he seems to have landed in the second- or third-best spot. The law court he worked in was the one that handled civil cases—wills, inheritance, fraud—not the juicy murders and other foul deeds for which the Roman Empire is famous. Later, he was appointed to a public office, but as the Curator of the Bed and Banks of the River Tiber and of the City's Sewers. Is that the job you would have wanted in imperial Rome? Later still, he was sent, as Trajan's imperial legate, to Bithynia (northern Turkey), where his main responsibility was to inspect the colony's finances. He wrote long letters to Trajan, asking whether he should do this or that. The letters took two months to arrive in Rome, and the answers took

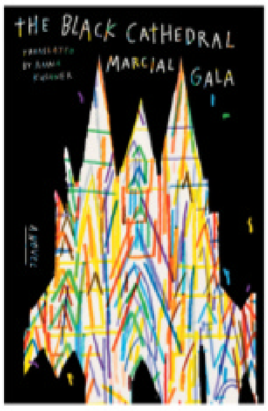
BRIEFLY NOTED



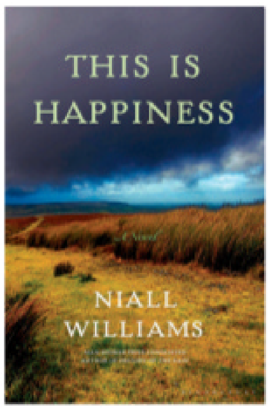
Love Unknown, *by Thomas Travisano (Viking)*. This literary biography of Elizabeth Bishop underscores the aptness of her epitaph: "All the untidy activity continues, / awful but cheerful." Bishop's poems, which Robert Lowell called "unrhetorical, cool, and beautifully thought out," belie the turbulence that marked her life. The outlines of that life are well known: her father's early death, her mother's mental illness, her drinking, her sojourns in Key West with her lover Louise Crane and in Brazil with Lota de Macedo Soares. (Intending to visit Brazil for a few weeks, Bishop stayed for nearly fifteen years, a decision partly prompted by the gift of a blue-eyed toucan, which she named Uncle Sam.) But the accounts are parsed with particular insight by Travisano, a Bishop specialist, who assiduously traces the influence of the life on the work.



Usual Cruelty, *by Alec Karakatsanis (New Press)*. Every day, some half a million people are kept in jail merely because they can't afford to post bail. As the author of this passionately argued book points out, this reality contravenes constitutional law yet is almost taken for granted by the legal profession. To challenge judicial practices that are "simultaneously illegal and the norm," he founded an organization that has sued abusive judges and jailers in more than a dozen states. Here, Karakatsanis sets out the moral and political philosophy that drives his work—that criminal law, and the manner in which it is selectively enforced, is a reflection of "power, racial bias, and economic self-interest." His vision is radical: a post-carceral society, in which imprisonment is "a narrowly tailored remedy of last resort."



The Black Cathedral, *by Marcial Gala, translated from the Spanish by Anna Kushner (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. Set in Cuba, this novel follows a black evangelical family's effort to build "the temple of end times" in "a neighborhood of forgotten black people and desperate white people." A futuristic, stained-glass-windowed building is planned, but a series of murders halts construction and leaves the site and the town cursed. By telling the story from the perspectives of various people in the community, Gala achieves an oral-history-like effect, producing a profound, and often humorous, meditation on how desires—religious, sexual, financial—clash in a small-town environment.



This Is Happiness, *by Niall Williams (Bloomsbury)*. This elegiac novel is as unhurried as its setting: Faha, a village in western Ireland, "unchanged since creation" until, in the late fifties, electricity arrives. The narrator, now elderly, reminisces about that time; having come from Dublin as a teen-ager, to live with his grandparents after the death of his mother, he conceived a hopeless passion for three sisters. "We spend most of our lives guarding against washes of feeling, I'm guarding no more," he promises. The novel's description of a lost rural life style, and the gaps between a young man's romantic expectations and the inescapable letdown of reality, is comic and poignant in equal measure.

two months to get back. Reading them, you sense that Trajan often wished Pliny would just go ahead and make whatever decision seemed reasonable.

We do hear about some celebrated crimes: Agrippina, the Emperor Claudius' wife, poisoning him in order to secure the succession for her son, Nero; Nero then killing Agrippina and also kicking his pregnant wife, Poppaea, to death. (That's after he arranged for the poisoning of his stepbrother, Brittanicus.) Then, there's Domitian, going off with, they say, whatever implement he had at hand, to terminate his niece Julia's pregnancy, engendered by him. This, Dunn writes, inspired a locally popular ditty: "Julia freed her fertile uterus by many / an abortion and shed clots which resembled their uncle." (Julia died from the procedure.) Next to such reports, the regular rubouts, as in the notorious Year of the Four Emperors, in 69 A.D.—Nero, to avoid execution, stabbed himself in the throat and was replaced by Galba, who was assassinated after seven months by the Praetorian Guard and succeeded by Otho, who ruled for three months before, faced with a rebellion, he committed suicide, yielding his place to Vitellius (soon murdered by the soldiers of Vespasian, but let's stop there)—look like business as usual. Or they would seem so if they didn't involve those little Cosa Nostra touches, such as a victim's being found with his penis cut off and stuffed in his mouth.

Of course, many of the most appalling episodes are well known from more famous accounts, in Tacitus' "Annals of Imperial Rome" and Suetonius' "Lives of the Twelve Caesars." Dunn has no scoops, and she knows it. Furthermore, she is trying to be faithful to Pliny's account, but, as she notes, he made a point, when he published his correspondence, of excising all the dates and arranging the letters, as he put it, "however they came to hand." She thinks that he was trying, by this means, to show "a life of ups and downs, uncertainties, and questions rather than certain progress."

If so, he achieved his goal. The letters have a weirdly drifting quality, as if these people woke up, went to the law courts, sentenced some people to death, burned a few Christians, and then went home to dinner. With such a source, it is no surprise that Dunn's book contains a number of challenges to our understanding. One is the treatment of the widely hated Emperor Domitian. Dunn quotes Suetonius to the effect that Domitian amused himself at night by stabbing the flies over his desk with a stylus, and she repeats the stories of his alleged dealings with his niece. Pliny, she says, pictured him as "a monster from Hades, hiding in his lair and licking his lips with the blood of relatives." But later she writes that the emperor was said to have been "a man of justice." Really? What do we do, then, with the jokes about the aborted fetuses that supposedly looked like their uncle Domitian? No matter how distant you feel from the morals of imperial Rome, you can't quite figure this out, and Dunn doesn't help us much.

At the risk, in such a context, of seeming sentimental, it must be said that the most striking thing about Pliny's letters is the lack of tender feeling. Dunn makes much of Pliny's affection for his third wife, Calpurnia, and of his sorrow when she had a miscarriage. (In the end, she died childless.) Dunn points out, too, that Pliny took Calpurnia to Bithynia with him. Somehow, though, these seem small tributes. When the two were apart, he wrote begging her to send him a letter once or even twice a day—"to delight and to torture me." She wrote back that her consolation, when they were separated, was to take his books to bed with her and hold them in the place where he usually lay. Why does her tribute sound so much more serious than his?

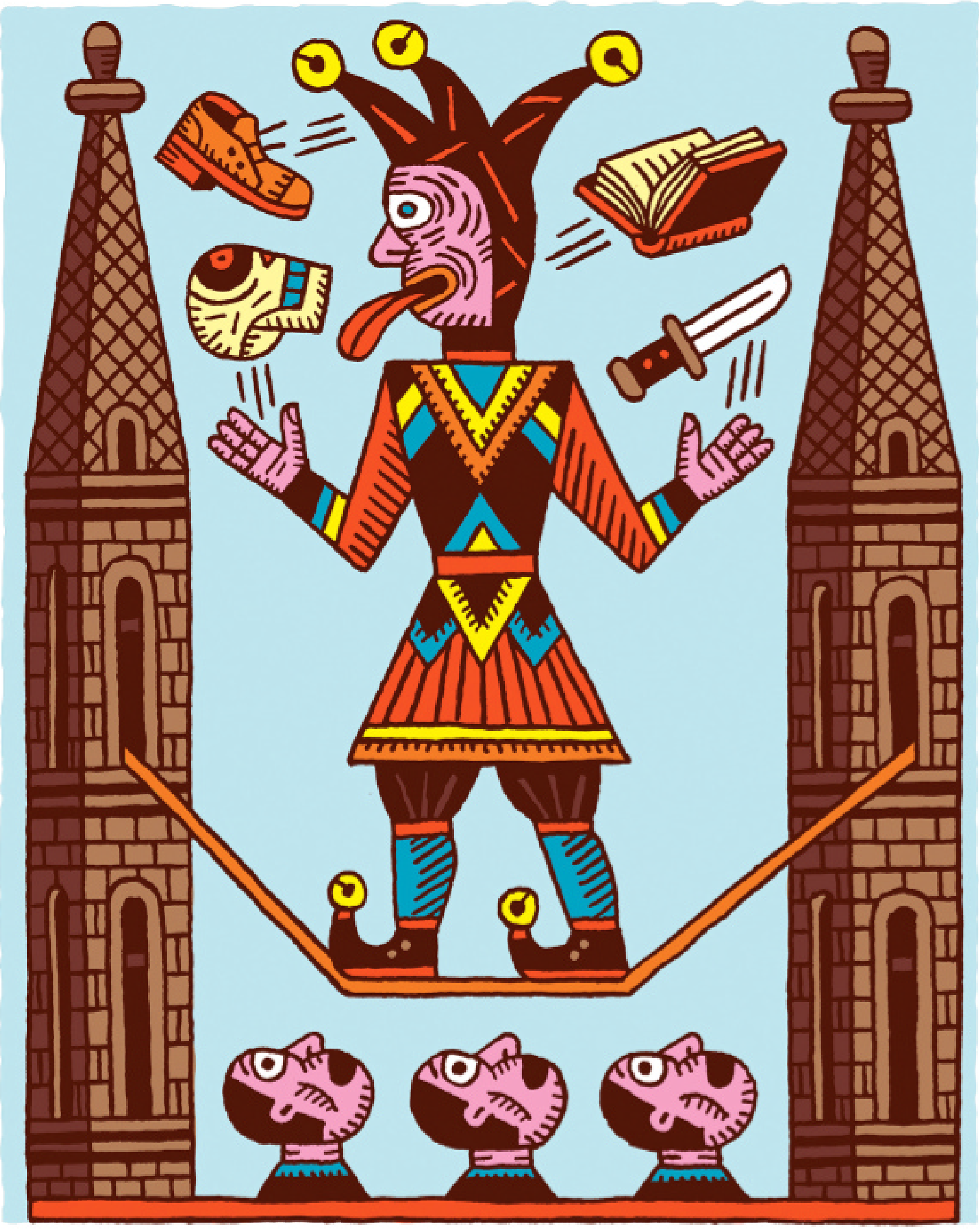
Pliny knew the art of fine words. In 100 A.D., he gave a speech—the Panegyricus, famous in its day—in praise of Rome's recently installed emperor, Trajan, who had to sit in front of him, in the Senate house, the whole time. He then revised and expanded it for publication. Scholars disagree about how long the speech would have lasted, but no one seems to think that the running time was less than three hours. Elsewhere, Pliny proudly mentions giving a speech that lasted seven. Describing the Panegyricus, Dunn comes close to mocking Pliny. "To modern ears his chosen style is somewhat grating and turgid," she says. With such statements, however, she does succeed in making Pliny, whom she clearly considers a sort of dry stick, a poignant character, the kind of person who has to do the dirty jobs of an empire and, having done them, gets no compliments.

Pliny's deepest feeling seems to have been his love of nature. By my count, he had at least five villas, and many of the most ardent passages in his letters are devoted to agricultural matters. Dunn writes that at his Tuscan estate he grew so many grapevines that they threatened to invade the villa:

> One of the bedrooms was constructed almost entirely from marble and contained a cabinet-like alcove for a bed. There were windows on every facet, but in summer the vines shrouded them in shade. Being in bed then, as flickers of light fought through the foliage, was "like lying in a wood, but without feeling the rain."

Here one feels the Romans' love of the world, and of that especially beautiful piece of it that is the Italian peninsula. In this sentiment, at least, Pliny was truly his uncle's nephew, which may go some way toward explaining the curious fact that, after the fall of Rome, anyone who still knew the name Pliny assumed that he was just one person. It was not until the early fourteenth century that a cleric at the cathedral of Verona figured out that there were two Plinys. And it was only in the fifteenth century that their books made it back into circulation. The Elder's "Natural History" had its first printed edition in 1469; his nephew's letters returned to publication in 1471. "The release of books by two Plinys," Dunn writes, "was met with considerable emotion across Italy."

Neither Pliny knew that his homeland's great mountain, Vesuvius, was nourishing in her bosom the extermination of so many of her people. This somehow makes the two men's kinship closer. In my mind's eye, I see Pliny, on the terrace of his mother's villa, watching the Roman quadriremes, under the Elder's direction, make for the opposite shore. Should he have gone with them? Perhaps, but it is typical of this cautious young person that he stayed back. In any case, his decision joined the two men permanently, at least in Roman history. Not only did Pliny live to tell the tale but the next day, when his childless uncle died on the beach of Stabiae, he became, by the directives of the will, the Elder's adoptive son and the inheritor of his property. And so he spent his later life gathering grapes on the hillsides that had been the old man's joy. ♦



BOOKS

PRANKED

In "Tyll," Daniel Kehlmann brings a mythical European trickster to life.

BY JAMES WOOD

A list of history's mythic tricksters, Lewis Hyde says in his book "Trickster Makes This World" (1998), would be endless. Since the trickster is culture's ultimate shape-shifting, boundary-crossing figure, "there will be some sort of representative wherever humans invent boundaries, which is to say, everywhere." Hyde refers in passing to one of Europe's most notorious tricksters, Till Eulenspiegel, who enters folk literature in the early sixteenth century but is supposed to have flourished earlier, in the fourteenth, crossing back and forth like a picaresque hero across his native Germany, the Netherlands, and Bohemia. Till was likely as ambiguous as the culture required: a dangerous vagrant, a folk hero, a journeyman magician, a bawdy circus performer, a jester and prankster who, like the Shakespearean Fool, recklessly needled those in power into looking honestly at themselves.

Like most great comic figures, the trickster embodies a kind of secular eternity—being unruly life itself, he is as unkillable as the Devil. Just as he is about to be captured and defeated, he slips away, to furnish another tale. Our less playful era tends to simplify such survivalism, awarding superhuman status to triumphant comic-book heroes or to grimly effective action figures, who survive so that they can reappear in lucrative sequels—Jason Bourne swimming away in the East River toward the next installment. "Tyll" (Pantheon), a new novel by the German writer Daniel Kehlmann, turns back to the earlier ambiguity, reanimating the old German chronicle of mobile mischief by placing its protagonist, Tyll Ulenspiegel, in a deeply imagined early-seventeenth-century world, a Europe ruined by the Thirty Years' War (1618-48).

I dimly recall studying that catastrophic event, best known perhaps for the brief appearance of "the Winter King" and for the Peace of Westphalia, which brought it to an end. Yet the conflict was one of comprehensive brutality and misery: millions were killed or displaced by battle, looting, and plague. At narrative ground level, the war is useful to Kehlmann as a plot prodder. Tyll is caught up in battles and royal intrigues; he switches from one side to another, hides out in a destroyed abbey, is apprehended by the Kaiser's men, joins the court-in-exile of "the Winter Queen" as a licensed Fool, and so on. We are offered vivid descriptions of villages burned to the ground, forests cut down, stinking encampments, the hungry and the sick wandering without help. This comes with the historical territory. Kehlmann, a confident magician himself, plays his bright pages like cards. But he has a deeper purpose, which is revealed only gradually, as the grand climacteric of his chosen war steadily justifies its presence in the novel.

A remote historical period, rollicking picaresque episodes, tricksters and magic, ancient foggy chronicles—all the dangers of the historical novel are here. The reader fears the modern writer's alienation from these distant events, the threat of steaming information dumps, comedy at once broad and shallow, untethered realism ballooning into pure fantasy. It's a pleasure to report that "Tyll" indulges in none of that (or as little as is generically possible). Kehlmann is a gifted and sensitive storyteller, who understands that stories originate within communities, and that such stories are convincingly dramatized when the novelist selflessly inhabits his characters' perspectives. Historical fiction makes the challenge of this authorial disappearance more acute, but also simpler: when a world view is remote, the appropriate novelistic response

Amid rival orthodoxies, Tyll is as reckless as the Devil and as selfless as Christ.

ILLUSTRATION BY HENNING WAGENBRETH

is to suppress any itching modernity and *become* that world view in order to salvage it for contemporary readers.

We see the novelist vanish in this way as Kehlmann establishes, in his early pages, the rich limits of the life that Tyll will eventually escape. Here is the boy Tyll, ceaselessly practicing how to walk a tightrope. He falls, and falls again: "It is not possible to walk on a rope. That is clear. Human feet aren't made for it. Why attempt it at all?" Around him is the village, the only world he knows. Most of the nearby fields are owned by Peter Steger: "Most of the animals too, which is easy to tell, for they have his brand on their necks." Here is Jakob Brantner's cowshed, and Martin Holtz's bakery, and here is the miller, Claus Ulenspiegel, Tyll's father, sitting at a table, doing what pleases him best: speculating. What is time? Does Hell exist? What are stars, and how many are there? "Recently the boy had asked him how many stars there actually are, and because only a short while ago Claus had counted, he was, not without pride, able to give him an answer." Tyll "has heard his father say everything that can be said."

Claus is an autodidact who has scavenged a large library; the book that most fascinates him is the one he hasn't read, because he doesn't know Latin. He's the village sage, a dispenser of healing balms and spells, a Christian who trusts in the protection of painted pentagrams. When his wife collapses, he draws one on her forehead and starts to speak: "*Christ was born in Bedlem, baptized in tho flem Jordan. Also tho flem astode, also astond thi blode. In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.* . . . He knows only roughly what this means, but the spell is ancient and he knows none stronger to stanch bleeding." (Kehlmann's shrewd translator, Ross Benjamin, vigorously grasps the offered challenges.)

Claus's activities excite the attention of two roving Jesuit inquisitors, Dr. Tesimond and Dr. Kircher, characters who reappear in the novel like sinister sidekicks out of Kafka (and who are modelled on their historical counterparts, Oswald Tesimond and Athanasius Kircher). They trick Claus into further speculation, then torture a confession of heresy out of him, easy enough since he is so humble. "It's obvious that he did something wrong in his stupid head, or else he wouldn't be here," Claus reflects, in prison. At his trial, he artlessly admits to helping the sick "according to the old way":

> I always did my best . . . I read the future of those who wanted to know it in water and bird flight. Peter Steger's cousin, not Paul Steger, the other one, Karl, I told him not to climb the beech tree, not even to find treasures, don't do it, I said, and the Steger cousin asked: A treasure in my beech tree? And I said: Don't do it, Steger, and Karl said: If there's a treasure there, I'm going up, and then he fell and smashed his head. And I can't figure it out, even though I think about it all the time, whether a prophecy that would not have come true if I hadn't made it is actually a prophecy or something else.

Claus knows what lies ahead, and goes to his death obediently, along with a local woman accused of witchcraft. The village hangman bluntly assures him that execution has improved: "In the past you were all burned to death. That takes time, it's not pleasant. But hanging is nothing. It happens quickly. You climb onto the scaffold and before you know it, you're standing before the Creator."

The day after his father's trial, Tyll skips out of the village, accompanied by Nele, a young woman he has persuaded to join him. Nele is odd, restless—she knows it is her fate to marry the Steger son, but she doesn't care to—and, like Tyll, a good dancer. The couple hitch a ride with a talentless balladeer named Gottfried, whom the reader finds performing a lamentable new song about a devilish miller who can only be Claus. Tyll's uncanny lack of a conscience—an almost ghostly absence of soul—can be gauged by his speedy adaptability: far from mourning, he improves Gottfried's public performance by dancing along to it. We can't help delighting in Tyll's puckish amorality—the liberating alternative to both the pious rectitude of the established order and the pious superstitions of his father.

The book's narrative is daringly discontinuous. Tyll and Nele now vanish, only to reappear in a new section that jumps ahead to the end of the Thirty Years' War. Somehow, in the ensuing decades, Tyll has established himself as the Holy Roman Empire's most celebrated jester, and the Kaiser wants him for his own household. From Vienna, the imperial capital, the Kaiser sends an envoy, Martin von Wolkenstein, to find Tyll and bring him back. Wolkenstein takes three sturdy soldiers with him, and eventually finds Tyll, who is poorly disguised as a monk—and who happily joins Wolkenstein's posse as it makes its adventurous way back to Vienna, a journey that takes in the last battle of the Thirty Years' War.

Despite the grimness of the surroundings and the lancing interventions of history, the novel's tone remains light, sprightly, enterprising. Kehlmann has an unusual combination of talents and ambitions—he is a playful realist, a rationalist drawn to magical games and tricky performances, a modern who likes to look backward. He made his name with his first novel to be translated into English, "Measuring the World" (2006), a vital and absurdly readable account of the intersecting lives of the explorer Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) and the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss (1777-1855). But "Measuring the World" was a more conventional novel than "Tyll." Because so much is known about the lives of these two celebrated figures, the book relaxed into easy biographical embroidery ("Alexander von Humboldt was famous in all of Europe for an expedition to the tropics he had led twenty-five years earlier. He had been to New Spain, New Granada, New Barcelona, New Andalusia, and the United States," and so on.) The episodic adventurousness of "Measuring the World" was sometimes purchased, one felt, at the cost of intensity and depth of inquiry.

"Tyll" is vivified by the remoteness of its setting and the mythical obscurity of its protagonist, which oblige Kehlmann to commit his formidable imaginative resources to wholesale invention, and to surrender himself to the curious world he both inhabits and makes. At once magister and magician, he practices the kind of novelistic modesty that can be found at the heart of classic storytelling. The writer animates a perspectival fictional universe that flutters with many relative truths—the strange and wonderful world views of the individual characters. Kehlmann’s publishers call his novel a work of “magic realism and adventure,” which is not wrong; a talking donkey and a dying dragon make their appearances. But magic realism is also simply a great fidelity to the perspectives of its characters. The miraculous, in Gabriel García Márquez, is, more often than not, a character’s vision of the supernatural, the veracity of which hangs in the communal air. In “One Hundred Years of Solitude,” the mythical-sounding “most beautiful woman who had ever been seen,” whom Aureliano Segundo treks across “the hallucinating plateau” to find, is the most beautiful woman *he* has ever seen; “the hallucinating plateau” is the place where he suffered hallucinations.

Such fantasy is also a dangerous form of liberty; in the hyper-devout, seventeenth-century world of “Tyll,” the political and religious authorities insist on imposing their absolute truths on everyone else’s relative truths. Kehlmann is drawn to the spectacle of this doctrinal fervor. Claus cheerfully blends magic and religion, but so do his Jesuit tormentors, without knowing it. Brandishing the weapons of faith and reason, serene in their rectitude, they root out what they demonize as ignorant, blasphemous superstition and magic. But how is the distinction to be drawn? Claus, like his fellow-villagers, believes that dead unbaptized babies become hostile spirits. Is this so different from believing, as many Christians then believed, that unbaptized babies go to Hell? Dr. Kircher believes that “the servants of Satan leave their bodies behind, and their spirits fly out to distant lands.” As European Christians of that era often did, he assumes that the world will end soon. (He gives it a hundred years.)

A considerable scholar, Kircher is learning how to read Egyptian hieroglyphics. When we encounter him later in the book, now an eminent professor at the Collegium Romanum, he is searching for a dragon, in order, he says, to extract its blood, from which he intends to concoct a cure for the plague. Kircher has solved the mystery of hieroglyphics to his own satisfaction, and it’s both a nice joke and further evidence of Kehlmann’s novelistic discretion that his great “discovery” is presented without commentary, from Kircher’s faulty viewpoint:

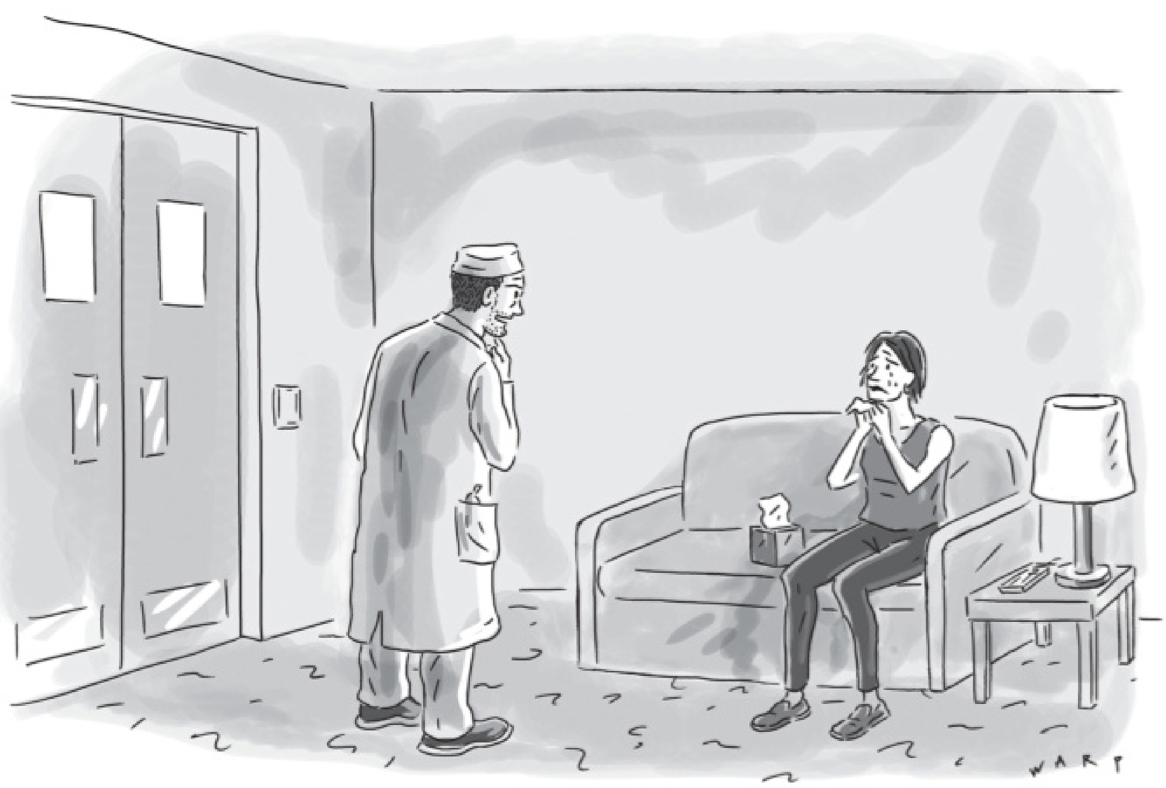
> Only because he had learned to trust entirely the Holy Spirit had he been able to accomplish his greatest work, the deciphering of the hieroglyphics. With the old tablet of signs that Cardinal Bembo had once bought he had gotten to the bottom of the mystery. . . . If one combined a wolf and a snake, it had to mean danger, but if there was a dotted wave under it, then God intervened and protected those who deserved his protection, and these three signs side by side meant mercy, and Kircher had fallen to his knees and thanked heaven for such inspiration.

The subtlety here lies not just in the rampantly erroneous Christianizing of a pre-Christian world but in the way these two religious languages, a supposedly pagan Egyptian religion and the certainties of European Christianity, are forced to judge each other, insisting as they do on their shared magic.

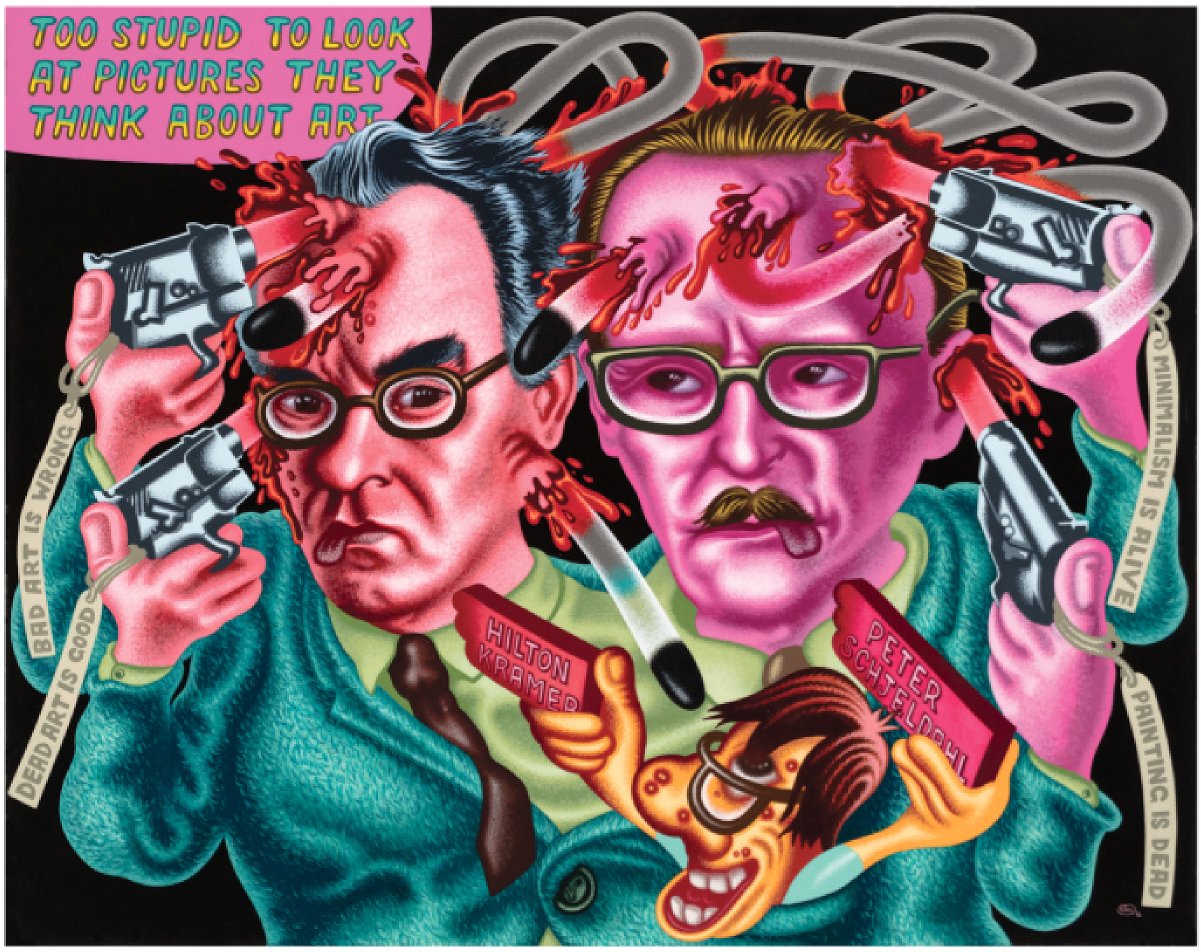
Thus Kehlmann’s decision to set his novel in a time of religious conflict gradually reveals its rationale. The Thirty Years’ War was a seismic reordering of European power produced by the earlier upheavals of the Reformation. The Holy Roman Empire comprised largely Protestant northern states and largely Catholic southern states. When Ferdinand II, the devoutly Catholic emperor, attempted to impose religious uniformity, the fragile coalition broke apart, and the policing of piety became brutal. García Márquez’s magic realism flourishes and expands within the relaxed folk Catholicism of Macondo; in the world of “Tyll,” narrow-minded religious and civil authorities seek to control the very definition of the magical.

Through this riven world, bristling with boundaries both political and ideological, dances our slippery survivalist, our great expansionist, Tyll—amoral, rebellious, untrustworthy, and exciting. (“Every traveling entertainer was a little bit devil and a little bit animal and a little bit harmless too.”) Amid rival superstitions, Tyll is magic itself; amid rival religious orthodoxies, Tyll is nothing and everything, a figure as reckless as the Devil and as selfless as Christ, more holy fool than Shakespearean Fool. At the end of Kehlmann’s novel, Tyll’s former employer, Elizabeth, the Winter Queen (the exiled daughter of the English King James I), catches up with him, and offers him an easy retirement. Tyll is old. So come back with me to England to a warm bed and daily soup, she says. Doesn’t that sound good? Not to Tyll. You know what’s better than dying in one’s bed? he asks. “Not dying, little Liz. That is much better.”

And so he exits the novel, to live again somewhere else, solidly realized and utterly evanescent, like the embodiment of fiction itself. For what does he want? Only to perform, to persuade, and to survive forever—ambitions doubtless familiar to his brilliant maker. ♦



“Well, there is one more procedure I’ve always wanted to try.”



"Art Critic Suicide," from 1996, features Hilton Kramer and the author.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

THE ART WORLD

TARGET PRACTICE

The paintings of Peter Saul.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Surprisingly, the timeliest as well as the rudest painting show of this winter, opening at the New Museum, happens to be the first New York museum survey ever of the American aesthetic rapscallion Peter Saul. The earliest of the works date from the early sixties, when Saul, who's from San Francisco, was a bohemian-dreaming expatriate in Paris: blowsy pastiches of Abstract Expressionist brushwork and proto-Pop imagery. Recognition so delayed bemuses almost as much as a reminder of the artist's current age: eighty-five, which seems impossible. Saul's cartoony style—raucously grotesque, often with contorted figures engaged in (and quite enjoying) intricate violence; caricatures of politicians from Nixon to Trump that come off as much fond as fierce; and cheeky travesties of classic paintings by Rembrandt, Picasso, and de Kooning—suggest the gall of an adolescent allowed to run amok. It takes time to become aware of how well Saul paints, with lyrically kinetic, intertwined forms and an improbable approximation of chiaroscuro, managed with neon-toned Day-Glo acrylics. He sneaks whispery formal nuances into works whose predominant effect may be as subtle as that of a steel garbage can being kicked downstairs. Not everyone takes the time. Saul's effrontery has long driven fastidious souls from galleries, including me years ago. Now I see him as part of a story of art and culture that has been unspooling since the nineteen-fifties; one in which, formerly a pariah, he seems ever more a paladin.

Saul, who now lives in upstate New York, was the only child of an oil executive and a federal-government secretary who appeared to take little interest in him. A nursemaid saw to much of his upbringing. He was packed off at ten to a rigid boarding school in Canada, where beatings were frequent and he was assumed, based on his last name, to be Jewish. Only after six years of enduring abuse as the school's rare "kike" did he learn that he wasn't. (Saul says that his name may be derived from his father's ancestral home, in England: the village of Saul, in Gloucestershire.) That strange tale feels both inconceivable and revelatory, considering the mixture of aggressive absurdity and armor-plated defiance with which Saul, after studying at the California School of Fine Arts and at Washington University School of Fine Arts, in St. Louis, entered into a tough-love romance with modern painting. He was already primed for affront by a love of hellacious comic books, such as the standout series, from the forties and early fifties, "Crime Does Not Pay." Those books were so gruesome that threats from Congress forced self-censorship on the industry, which in 1954 instituted the Comics Code Authority. Saul thrilled, too, to figurative painters who had fallen from fashion in New York as abstraction became well-nigh obligatory: Salvador Dali, Thomas Hart Benton, Paul Cadmus, George Tooker. Saul says that when he was five years old he was deeply affected by a reproduction of Cadmus's rhapsody of human ugliness, "Coney Island" (1934). In it, a wobbling pyramid of gross bathers pose for a snapshot. Others writhe or sprawl, contributing to a sort of carnal junk yard, though with the homoerotic garnish of one good-looking young man in the background.

Tyro ambition pointed Saul toward Europe, where he spent eight years in England, the Netherlands, Paris, and Rome. He took to painting jam-packed brushy images of consumer goods, body parts, and (inspired by his discovery of *Mad*, in 1957 or so) lampooned comic characters, including Superman and Donald Duck, who tend to meet awful fates on his canvases. (Only oldsters like me will remember the revolutionary effect, on young minds, of the early *Mad's* scorched-earth hilarity.) Art historians have striven to categorize those works by their affinity to Expressionism, Surrealism, and English Pop art, but, as with everything Saul, including his drive-by relation to funk and psychedelia in San Francisco, in the hippie sixties, the links don't hold. (He turned down overtures from R. Crumb and other cartoonists to collaborate in the underground-comics movement of the time.) His adamant individualism is keyed precisely to his rejection of similitude to the manners of anyone else.

Especially futile are comparisons to the New York Pop of Warhol and Lichtenstein, who tempered the shock of vernacular images with modernist formal cool—far more in tune with the sang-froid of minimalism than was initially noticed. Saul brought heat, with goofball and/or monstrous, teeming imagery that makes sensation a means and an end in itself. His pictures mount furious assaults on the eye, leaving you with indescribable (art critics aren't supposed to say that, but I give up) choreographies of one damned thing after another. Where Emanuel Leutze carefully arrayed the constituent parts of "Washington Crossing the Delaware," his 1851 commemoration of American valor, Saul's 1995 parody keeps the elements more or less in place—but mostly, vertiginously, less. That boat is doomed. Compared with him, Lichtenstein is Ingres. Saul came to function as an exterminator of the kind of refined sensibility that separated the sophisticates from the yahoos in haut-bourgeois twentieth-century America. Maybe think of him as a yahoo's yahoo, by design.

As a malcontent, Saul tends toward a policy of not so much getting mad about anything in particular as of getting even across the board. In 1996, he made a topical exception with "Art Critic Suicide," which is not in the show but has been reproduced here at my request. It features me and the conservative critic Hilton Kramer (1928-2012) as Siamese twins gravely blowing our brains out with bullets whose wandering malice isn't sated by plugging us only once. Saul tells me that he forgets the proximate motive, but it may have had to do with how paintings of his in the 1995 Whitney Biennial were received. I was amused at being paired with a writer who was so much an intellectual antagonist of mine that you'd have been unlikely to encounter us sharing the same city street, let alone what amounts to a history painting. At any rate, I was taking hot lead for belonging to a New York critical establishment that had condescended to the wrong guy.

The timeliness of the New Museum's show strikes me as threefold. First, there's an air of canonical dignity that hasn't exactly been earned but has irresistibly descended. Decades of aesthetic, social, and political democratizing have collapsed the redoubts of consensus good taste. (If you think Rembrandt is a better painter than, say, Richard Prince, as I certainly do, be ready to make the case.) Second, young painters are on board. The various returns to (or re-volcanic-eruptions of) figurative image-making in current art make Saul's multifarious tropes a handy visual thesaurus for engaging the mind through corporeal mimesis. (Never mind the heart, though. Saul's emotional tone, with no exception that occurs to me, is a polar vortex.)

Finally, we may have here a test of political correctness. Although the show's selection of works is ecumenically misanthropic, it admits wildly stereotypical renderings of African-Americans, Asians, and women—defensible, if they are, by being so far over the top of any detectable attitude as to self-destruct. Where apparent, Saul's satirical spleen is default leftist—he was America's most graphically anti-Vietnam War painter, as witness the storming pageant of American-soldier depravity that is "Saigon" (1967)—but with an antic panache that gainsays righteousness. "Crucifixion of Angela Davis" (1973), in which the activist is stuck with knives and sports a halo, might equally be seen as tweaking the left's deification of Davis as protesting her persecution. Either way, or neither, sheer visual impact seems to be Saul's aim, in service to an ever-seething personal rage that finds release and takes refuge in double-down buffoonery. He is like one of Dostoyevsky's irrepressible fomenters of chaos. Is moral equivocation for art's sake O.K.? The temerity is echt Saul, who, whatever you choose to think of him, definitely disagrees with you. Is raw intensity a malady or a purgative? Does it kill or cure? ♦

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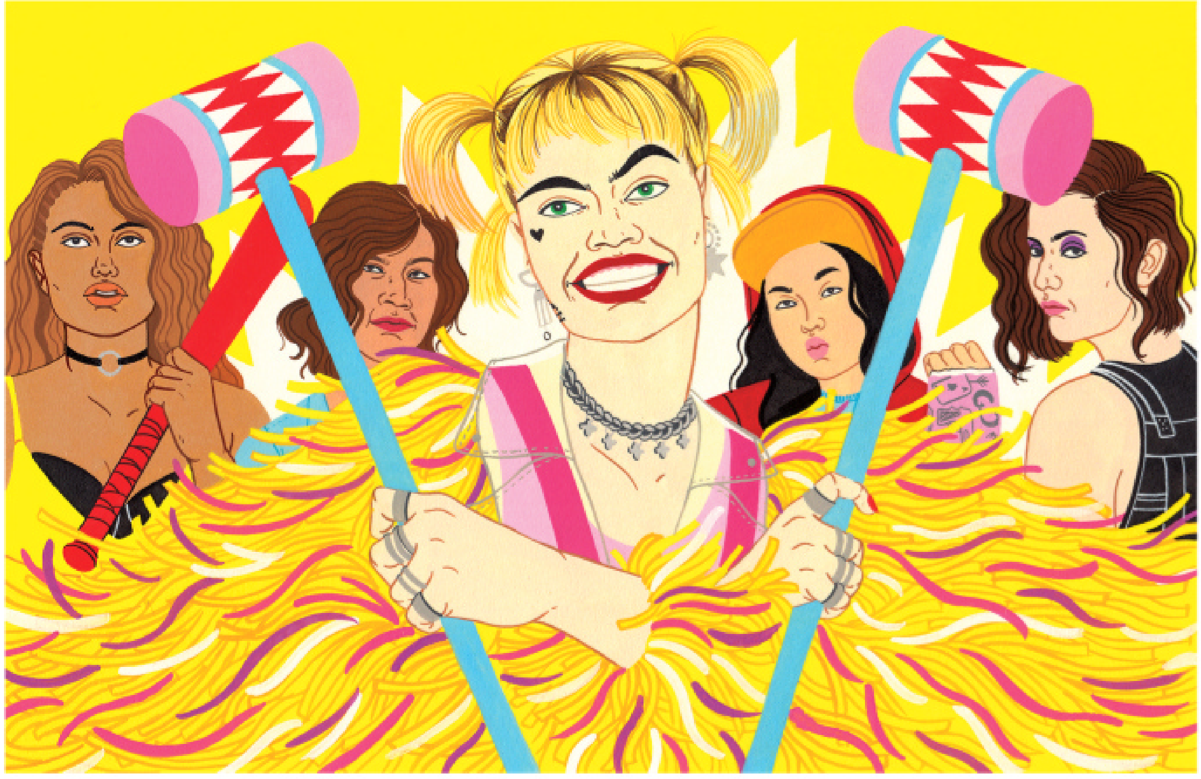

Margot Robbie plays the nefarious Harley Quinn in Cathy Yan's film.

THE CURRENT CINEMA

CRIMINAL

"Birds of Prey" and "Corpus Christi."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Beware of movies with long titles. I vaguely recall a Dustin Hoffman film, made in 1971, called "Who Is Harry Kellerman and Why Is He Saying Those Terrible Things About Me?," but for the life of me I can't remember the answer to either question. An oversized title has no practical worth, its sole purpose being to give us a mandatory dose of wackiness. Hence the latest contender, "Birds of Prey, and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn." Don't you feel kooked up just *reading* that?

The film, directed by Cathy Yan, follows on from "Suicide Squad" (2016), which ranked among the most thumpingly cheerless experiences of recent years. Sequels were therefore inevitable. This one begins—and, given the tone at which the movie aims, should perhaps have continued—with a high-speed cartoon sequence. We are yanked through the personal history of Harley Quinn (Margot Robbie), a bright kid who went on to become first a psychiatrist and then a frenzied felon. What wrought the change was her relationship with the Joker, a big cheese in the stink of Gotham City. (In case you're wondering: no, Joaquin Phoenix does not appear.) Harley, however, has now split with her grinning swain and gone solo.

Comic-book films are plagued by a particular indecision: are the protagonists better off being lonesome or gregarious? When we describe them as clubbable, is that because they like to gang together or because, taken as individuals, they're just asking to be hit over the head? Needless to say, the plague is extremely profitable; Iron Man, for instance, has three Marvel movies pretty much to himself but also gets folded into the Avengers. The DC franchise, desperate not to be outdone, has tried something similar with Batman, forcing the poor fellow to sign up for "Justice League" (2017), when we all know that he'd be so much happier staying home, curling up in his little Bat-bed, and shedding idle tears over the Bat-days that are no more.

No one could call Harley Quinn a recluse. She loves to go out, get wasted, meet people, and fight them. In onscreen graphics, she proudly reports what it is about her that vexes her opponents. ("Voted for Bernie." "Have a vagina.") Yet Harley is often alone in the frame—marching toward the camera in her T-shirt and shorts, smiling madly through lips of fire-engine red, and peppering us with unceasing chatter, as if words were buckshot. She lives on her own, too, with a stuffed beaver in a tutu and a pet hyena named Bruce. (As with the title, note the surfeit of nuttiness. Rarely have I seen a movie strain so hard to seem out-there.) Our heroine needs some kindred spirits, and quick.

So, a warbling welcome to the Birds of Prey: Cassandra Cain (Ella Jay Basco), a teen-age thief; Dinah Lance (Jurnee Smollett-Bell), a singer and chauffeur; and Renee Montoya (Rosie Perez), a cop who's been passed over for promotion. Last and loftiest is Helena Bertinelli—the one interesting card in the pack, the reason being neither her backstory (some Mafia-flavored baloney about revenge) nor her skill with a crossbow but the fact that she's played by Mary Elizabeth Winstead, who, thanks to her low and Lauren Bacall-ish delivery, brings an amused aloofness to the fray. All of the above team up with Harley to tackle Roman Siones (Ewan McGregor), a Gotham superthug, otherwise known as Black Mask. Why? *Because he sometimes wears one.* Scary.

The script is by Christina Hodson, who has also contributed to the creation of Highland 2, an app that enables you to submit your screenplay to gender analysis. No surprise, then, that Yan's movie, peopled as it is by women who talk among themselves, with only fitful reference to men, doesn't so much pass the Bechdel Test as ace it, while also ticking the profanity box, the ear-splitting box, and the bone-snapping box—every box, in fact, except for the tricky one that requires a motion picture to be good. "Birds of Prey," alas, is an unholy and sadistic mess. "Nothing gets a guy's attention like violence," Harley says, and the action consists largely of female combatants breaking the limbs of hapless males and clobbering them in the groin. Thoroughly deserved, I guess, and about time, too, though the point was more efficiently and more elegantly made long ago, in "Nothing Sacred" (1937), when Carole Lombard, in revenge for being punched

ILLUSTRATION BY LAURA CALLAGHAN

by Fredric March, slugs him back. For a second, he teeters upright, whereupon she puffs at him, as if blowing the clock off a dandelion, and he keels over. That gets his attention just fine.

The contenders for Best International Feature Film at the forthcoming Academy Awards are a muscular crew. Four of them—"Pain and Glory,""Parasite,""Honeyland," and "Les Misérables"—are already on the loose. The fifth is a Polish movie, "Corpus Christi," which opens on February 19th. Directed by Jan Komasa, it stars a young actor named Bartosz Bielenia, a bundle of intensity with a buzz cut. If Oscars were decided according to the speed with which voters flipped out when they stared into the eyes of the principal character, "Corpus Christi" would be an easy winner.

Most of the tale is set in a village in Poland. There, the faithful are tended by Father Tomasz (Bielenia), who hears their confessions and strives to heal their wounds. He also smokes and drinks with his parishioners, dances with them, and shows them his tattoos. (One is a large Madonna and Child, incised on his upper back.) His congregation, sparse when he first arrives, begins to swell. By the end, the pews are full.

Just one problem: Father Tomasz is not Father anything. He's not a priest at all. And his name isn't Tomasz but Daniel. He's a jailbird, sent to prison for a vicious crime, and that's where we initially meet him, as he keeps watch while his fellow-inmates brutalize some poor soul in the carpentry workshop. Not long afterward, Daniel is released on parole. Having fêted his freedom with a bout of boozing, cocaine snorting, and casual sex, he takes a bus to the far-flung village, where a job in a sawmill awaits him. One glance at the mill, though, is enough; he walks on, goes to the house of the local clergyman, and announces himself as Father Tomasz. When the elderly incumbent is taken sick, the young pretender steps in.

The comic potential of this setup isn't hard to spot, and many movies have followed the farcical path. The theory that dressing up as a man of God is intrinsically funny was proved by Denholm Elliott, as a butler turned doddering Irish priest, in "Trading Places" (1983), though later refuted by Sean Penn and Robert De Niro, in "We're No Angels" (1989). The clearest predecessor of Komasa's film is "Le Missionnaire" (2009), a French frolic that never came out in America. It was all about, you guessed it, an ex-con who lands in a secluded community and dons a cassock as a cunning disguise.

The difference is that "Corpus Christi" ain't funny. There are scraps of levity, as when Daniel, in the confessional, furtively checks his phone for the correct sacramental procedure, yet what ensues, in that scene, is the most affecting moment in the movie, with a female penitent reduced to tears by the counsel that he provides. Notice that we don't actually see him give her absolution; do the filmmakers consider that a heresy too far? Bearing in mind that Poland, where eighty-six per cent of adults call themselves Catholics, is the most devout of the larger European nations, you soon realize that Daniel is anything but a simple fraud. In prison, he assists the chaplain—a tough nut, whose name really *is* Father Tomasz (Lukasz Simlat)—during services, and asks whether, as a convict, he might be accepted at a seminary. (Not a chance.) For Daniel, the religious life is more than a convenient front, or a refuge where he can go to ground. It is, or could have been, his natural home. The spirit is willing, but the résumé is weak.

Komasa strews the narrative with subplots. Daniel is drawn to a young woman, Marta (Eliza Rycembel), but scorned by her mournful mother, Lidia (Aleksandra Konieczna), who is both the housekeeper at the vicarage and the sexton at the church. (Does she suspect him of deceit? It's a fine performance, alert with moral suspense.) Also, before Daniel's time, there was a fatal road accident, in which six inhabitants of the village crashed into a seventh. The whole place has been roiled by grief, and it's up to the pseudo-priest to confront the waves of anger and recrimination, and to bid them be still.

Some of these story lines, in truth, work better than others. Whenever the movie strays from its hero, you feel oddly impatient to get back to him, to watch his cravings do battle with his conscience, and to wonder anew what's burning in his blue-green gaze. On the dance floor, he looks frankly terrifying, as if lost in a pentecostal trance. "Corpus Christi" is neither a parable nor an allegory, yet image after image seems charged with intent, from the opening shot—of carpenters' saws, grating to and fro like instruments of torture—to the climax, an apocalyptic welter of fire and blood. This Daniel has no need to enter a lions' den. If I were a lion, I'd be afraid to enter his. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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VOLUME XCVI, NO. 1, February 17 & 24, 2020. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for four combined issues: February 17 & 24, June 8 & 15, July 6 & 13, and August 3 & 10) by Condé Nast, a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Eric Gillin, chief business officer; Piper Goodspeed, head of brand revenue strategy; James Guilfoyle, executive director of finance and business operations; Fabio B. Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast Global: Roger Lynch, chief executive officer; Wolfgang Blau, chief operating officer and president, international; Pamela Drucker Mann, global chief revenue officer and president, U.S. revenue; Anna Wintour, U.S. artistic director and global content advisor; Mike Goss, chief financial officer; Samantha Morgan, chief of staff. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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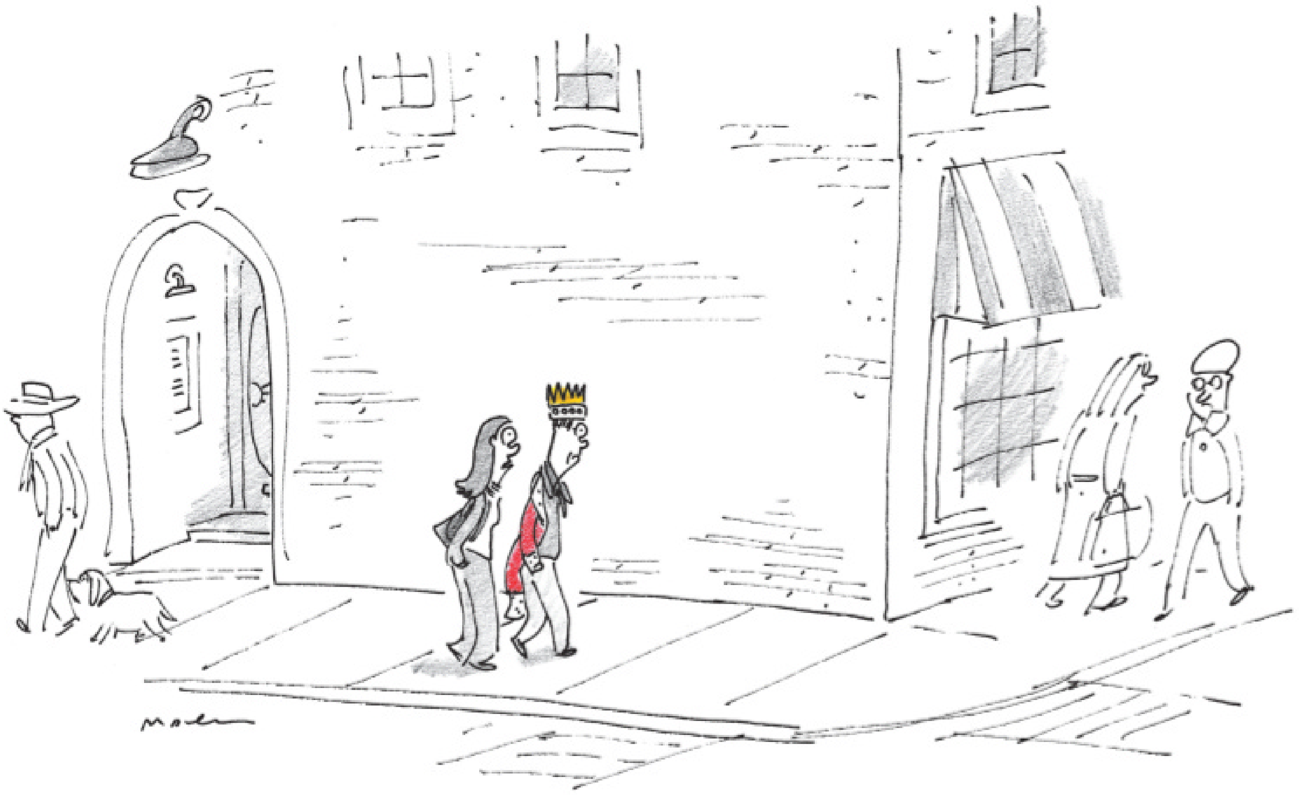
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Michael Maslin, must be received by Sunday, February 23rd. The finalists in the February 3rd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 9th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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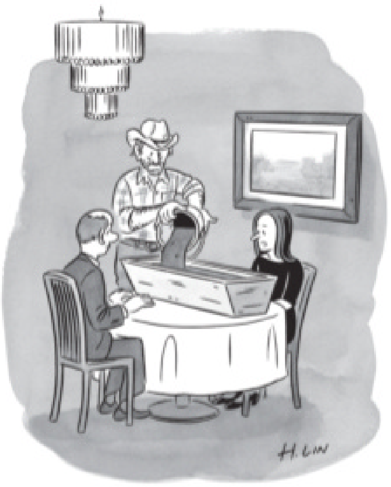
THE FINALISTS

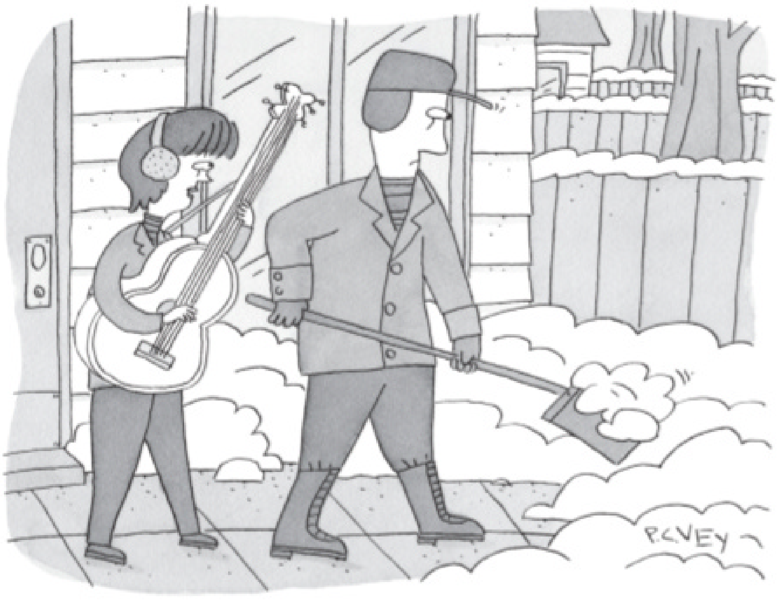


“If there's a ring in here, Hank, I swear to God . . .”
Brittany Vance, Idaho Falls, Idaho

“Don't ask for a spoon—he'll know we're tourists.”
Ped Naseri, Los Angeles, Calif.

“I have a feeling I'm not going to like the suggested wine pairing.”
Michael Civerolo, San Diego, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“I didn't say I would help. I said I'd accompany you.”
Mark Paladini, Los Angeles, Calif.